

**A Doctor Talks  
About Dying**

**Gradually & Suddenly  
Supporting Grief**

**Escalating Bliss:  
Death with Dignity**

# HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

FALL 2023



## **Ending Life Well**

**A humanistic  
approach  
to saying the  
final goodbye**



## Why Humanistic Judaism?

Humanistic Judaism provides community for people of all backgrounds to explore and shape the evolving meaning of Jewish traditions through a nontheistic, inclusive worldview. It incorporates a humanistic philosophy of life into Jewish liturgy, holiday celebrations, and lifecycle events in place of traditional worship of the supernatural. Founded in the 1960s by a community led by Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine, it gives voice to the way most Jews already believe: that ethics and values are human-made, not divinely revealed, and are continually progressing based on reason, knowledge, empathy, and justice.

Today, our faith rests in one another, in the power of people to understand our world and influence it for the better to achieve universal human dignity and steward the future of our planet. For justice to exist in our world, we must create it together. And to gain new knowledge we trust academic and scientific methods over religious dogma. Because our approach is cultural rather than religious, we welcome all to participate without boundaries and we celebrate the diversity of our multiracial, multicultural, and LGBTQ+ households.

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PHOTO BY JAMES M. BRANUM - WWW.JMB.MX

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# FROM THE EDITOR



## Letting Go Is A Virtue

In this issue, we are exploring how Humanistic Judaism can positively shape the experiences of dying and mourning. We are doing this because a core value of our tradition is valuing life, celebrating life, and, most of all, living life well.

Death is a fundamental part of life. We know this from nature because everything that was once alive dies. We know the reality of death, and yet we often hope otherwise. And sometimes when we can't ignore the reality of death anymore, we fight it.

Humanistic Judaism offers another way. Our approach is not avoidance, but neither is it clinging to magical thinking as an escape. We instead face the reality of death, and in doing so, are empowered to intentionally live our lives well, even to the end.

In this issue we hear from Dr. Adam Skrzynski, who reflects on what he has learned about death as a physician and we also hear from Marla Davis Henry, in "Gradually and Suddenly," about the experience of facilitating support groups for caregivers of people living in a memory-care



We know the reality of death, and yet we often hope otherwise. And sometimes when we can't ignore the reality of death anymore, we fight it.

facility, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We are fortunate to also hear from those who have been the companion of others in their process. Rabbi Miriam Jerris wrote in "Escalating Bliss and a Choiceful Death" about being with her beloved aunt as she went through the process of Medical Aid in Dying (MAID), and how being able to make choices in dying enabled her aunt to die like she lived, deliberately and passionately.

Humanistic Judaism also has wisdom for the process of mourning. These practices (including some of the creative ways that Humanistic Jews have reinterpreted traditional practices) are explored by Rabbis Adam Chalom and Jeffrey L. Falick. We also have an article telling about the Memorial Garden at CHJ-Metro Detroit and an interview of Arlene Gerwin by Shelia Malcom about how after the loss of her husband, learning of Humanistic Judaism's approach to death led her to recognize she was a Humanistic Jew herself.

Also, in this issue, we have news from our local communities and our periodic list of donors to the SHJ who make the work of the SHJ (and this magazine) possible.

As always, we welcome your comments and questions. Please send them to us at [humanisticjudaismmagazine@gmail.com](mailto:humanisticjudaismmagazine@gmail.com)

J.M.B.  
Editor

Use the QR code to find citations, notes, and other resources that accompany this issue.



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SUMMER 2023

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**Wendy Ostrow** is the sister of long-time member of the Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in Fairfield County, Connecticut, Gail Ostrow.

**Adam Skrzyński** is a physician, MPH candidate at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and student in the IISHJ Leadership Program, living in South Jersey with his wife and 3 daughters. Adam's connection to Humanistic Judaism began before birth with his parents being married by Rabbi Sherwin Wine, and in much searching, he has found no better synergy with his personal beliefs and love for his Jewish heritage.

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## To Helen & Saul Forman

Mazel Tov on your new home

– From Rabbi Miriam Jerris  
& Steve Stawicki

## To Wendy Kaminer

In loving memory of your  
husband, Woody Kaplan

– The staff & board of the Society  
for Humanistic Judaism

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# COMMUNITY NEWS

FAIRFIELD COUNTY, CT | CONGREGATION FOR HUMANISTIC JUDAISM

## Gail's Home Funeral

After an exhausting vigil for all of us, Gail let go of her body on Christmas eve, 2022. Husband Robb, daughter Beth, and I (her sister), had discussed having a home funeral instead of shiva and agreed that we wanted to keep Gail's body with us for a couple of days to say goodbye, to sit or lie by her side, and absorb this extraordinary transition.

Three wonderful women said yes to my request to attend to her body, to engage in the Jewish tradition of *tahara* (washing and cleansing of the body), with the artistic freedom of the California movement of home funerals. We lovingly washed her body and hair and scented her skin with lotion and fragrant oil. Coordinating our movements like a dance, was a blessing and ritual in which none of the women had ever participated. We dressed her in beautiful colors and textures and surrounded her with colorful scarves and blankets. We paid attention to her lovely face as it relaxed and became more of a container and less of a person we knew as beloved. The ritual took us around two hours.



Over the next two days Robb and Beth invited friends to sit with Gail or remain downstairs and visit. I was touched when a dear friend of Gail's shared that she had never sat at a home with a deceased loved one. For her, the experience was unique and deeply moving. For me, having Gail close for that extended time felt timeless and spiritual in the deepest sense.

Saying goodbye to our loved ones is difficult. There is more than one way to do so.

– Wendy Ostrow

ONLINE | SPINOZA HAVURAH

## Spinoza Havurah to Launch a Program Exploring Humanistic Judaism

The Spinoza Havurah (an online international Humanistic Jewish community) will launch an Exploring Humanistic Judaism class starting in mid-October 2023.

The class will consist of twice-monthly Zoom meetings in which participants will hear a short presentation on relevant topics, followed by time for discussion. Program participants will also be given access to a class members-only Facebook group for discussion and fellowship between meetings.

The program will start after Simchat Torah and run through Shavuot in May 2024. The class is designed to be an entry point into more profound engagement with Humanistic

Judaism for motivated adult learners, including Jews, those on the path to adopting Judaism, friends, family, and allies.

Class participants who complete a final project will be invited to participate in a special adult B-mitzvah service of the Spinoza Havurah during which they will be given an *aliyah* (called to give a talk on their chosen topic).

This program is free (donations are welcome), and the class is open to anyone aged 16 and up. You do not have to be a participant in our havurah to take this class.

For more information visit: [spinozahavurah.org](http://spinozahavurah.org) or email [spinozahavurah@gmail.com](mailto:spinozahavurah@gmail.com).

– James M. Brantum

DURHAM/CHAPEL HILL, NC  
KOL HASKALAH

## Spreading the Word about Humanistic Judaism

On June 2, 2023, Cathy Moore, President of Kol Haskalah, made a presentation called “What is Humanistic Judaism?” to the Men's and Women's Groups at Jewish for Good, the Levin Jewish Community Center in Durham, North Carolina. The presentation sparked some great questions and discussions, as well as renewed our connections with some other area Jewish and Humanistic groups.

Preparing the presentation reminded us of the history and philosophy of Humanistic Judaism and rekindled our enthusiasm. It also infused fresh energy into our efforts to rebuild our congregation after the COVID pandemic. In addition to our High Holiday services, our fall plans include a joint panel discussion with the Ethical Humanist Society of the Triangle about the most salient ethical issues today and a monthly discussion group and bagel brunch focused on issues such as antisemitism in America, what makes a religion, and when did Jews become White?

The presentation slides can be found in the Community Calendar of the Kol Haskalah website ([KolHaskalah.org](http://KolHaskalah.org)). We'd like to thank all of those members of the SHJ Leadership Listserv who offered their slide presentations, and especially Congregation Beth Adam in Boca Raton and the Gainesville Humanistic Judaism Community, whose presentation slides were adapted for our use.

– Marcia Gumpertz



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Society for  
**Humanistic  
Judaism**



# What Being a Physician Has Taught Me About Death

BY DR. ADAM SKRZYNSKI

**D**eath. The very name of this inevitable consequence of human life is often something that we wish to avoid.

On one hand, death is something we continuously run from, taking on the trappings of the latest health craze in a search for immortality, or perhaps taking on a belief system that ensures perennial existence in a blissful afterlife. On the other hand, knowledge of our eventual death gives the moments of life, from the mundane to the extraordinary, a poignance and meaning that they might otherwise lack if we knew that we would live forever. Death is not something that in the back of our minds we plan for, but something that will take place at a ripe old age after a long, productive, and fulfilling life.

Of course, it does not always happen this way. As a physician, I have never been reminded more often and more vividly of my own mortality. It is ironic that in a profession that exists for the betterment and extension of human life, death often takes center stage. In that life, some wish for longevity, some wish for quality, and if we are lucky, we have both. The end of human life can be harsh and tragic, but when a life is put into its proper context, against the vast statistical improbability that it should have existed at all, it is a miracle in the true sense of the word.

It is fair to say that death and its end-of-life issues have followed me since childhood. For almost a decade, my father was involved in the various prosecutions of Jack Kevorkian. The issues of the right to die, assisted suicide

and euthanasia permeated many a family dinner conversation. I came away from this with a poor opinion of Kevorkian himself, but a belief that a person should be allowed to choose the terms of their death, allowing for dignity. I began my medical school career studying anatomy in the cadaver lab. Fresh out of my college experience it was a surreal and discomfiting experience. I looked down at the woman on the table before me and wondered what kind of life experience was encapsulated in her remains. In truth though, what struck me most about those months was being surrounded by the finality of death, each day a reminder that what we were, who we were, would live on in the hearts and minds of others, but not in the cold flesh of what was left.

Apart from a humanistic rabbi, a



It is never too late to develop an advanced directive and name a durable power of attorney for medical care, both of which serve to ease the process of death and ensure dignity when a person cannot communicate those decisions in the moment of need. It can be a tremendous lift of burden on the family as well, who are spared the agonizing process of guessing what a loved one may have wanted.



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physician seems as one can get. As a specialist in infectious diseases, treating hospitalized patients, I have often been involved in the care of those with dire illness. I have seen many a patient decline to the point of my painful duty to help guide their family to the inevitable conclusion that palliation and hospice, not ventilation, is the right course of action.

It is never too late to develop an advanced directive and name a durable power of attorney for medical care, both of which serve to ease the process of death and ensure dignity when a person cannot communicate those decisions in the moment of need. It can be a tremendous lift of burden on the family as well, who are spared the agonizing process of guessing what a loved one may have wanted. End-of-life discussions, like those involving severe brain injury, are never easy ones to have as a physician, but they are ultimately essential to reaffirming the integrity and honor of those facing their final minutes of life.

In our privileged Western world, rarely do we confront collective mortality, but that is exactly what we did beginning in early 2020 with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since it began, more than one out of every 300 people in the United States have succumbed to the illness.

In medical school and history classes, I had read about the 1918 influenza pandemic, and the ravages of morbidity and death that it spawned worldwide. I don't think that a family-safer physician for that matter, anticipated that we would confront a similar specter in our own lifetimes; for my generation, living in the United States, September 11, 2001, was as bad as it had gotten.

Society's response to COVID saw some of the greatest highs and lows of historical memory. The rapid dissemination of scientific information and collective research and production of vaccines and therapeutics represent, in my view, one of

achievements in human history (and a wonderful universal example of *pikuach nefesh*, our tradition's principle of valuing human life over most else).

It is never too late to develop an advanced directive and name a durable power of attorney for medical care, both of which serve to ease the process of death and ensure dignity when a person cannot communicate those decisions in the moment of need. It can be a tremendous lift of burden on the family as well, who are spared the agonizing process of guessing what a loved one may have wanted. End-of-life discussions, like those involving severe brain injury, are never easy ones to have as a physician, but they are ultimately essential to reaffirming the integrity and honor of those facing their final minutes of life.

In my current work, as an HIV subspecialist, I still think about death and its historical character. I have many patients who have been through the development of HIV, and subsequent treatments, and their perspective on their personal confrontation with AIDS and mortality provides a powerful lesson as to how we should live. How many people needlessly died for the lies that were spread?

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forces one to think hard on these issues as they pertain to one's own life. Of course, with time, a person living with HIV learns that these fears are largely unfounded; but these fears are not unique to HIV and are truly human. It is remarkable that a human body can function properly for one second let alone a full lifetime.

Death is an enigma, and the final answer to the question of every person's life. It is our common destination, and perhaps our most important preoccupation. Without death, what is the point of life? At least in its present form, what is the point of religion, philosophy, ethics, medicine, or science? Would we need to reach for the stars, sans death?

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# CARING

# Gradually and Suddenly

BY MARLA DAVIS HENRY

For the past 5 years, I have facilitated monthly support groups for caregivers whose loved ones live in a memory care facility. In March 2020, like the rest of the world, we began meeting on Zoom.

It wasn't long before we decided to connect every other week as the caregivers were struggling not only with loneliness and isolation but also with grief over not being able to visit their loved ones and fear that, by the time quarantine ended, their spouse, sibling, or parent would no longer recognize them.

Once outdoor visits were allowed, any hope of a meaningful in-person encounter evaporated since having dementia doesn't lend itself well to compliance with wearing a mask and staying 6 feet apart. Attempts at virtual visits also failed as already confused residents became even more frustrated when the family member Face Timing them couldn't be found standing behind the screen.

Many tears were shed during those first 8 months as families grieved not being able to connect with their loved





# SPIRITUALITY

## Escalating Bliss and a Choiceful Death

BY RABBI MIRIAM JERRIS

In April 2022, I received a phone call from my aunt, Judith Rockert. I was in suburban Chicago at the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism (IISHJ) Rabbinic and Officiant Ordination and the SHJ Board Meeting. She wanted to talk, but there were rules. I could not drive the car while we were talking, I needed to be by myself, and she needed fifteen to thirty minutes of my time. I was not going to be home for almost four days, and I hate delayed gratification. When I think back on that call, I don't remember spending a lot of time ruminating. I was busy and with family and was annoyed with all the restrictions I was given. Her call would pass through my mind, and I didn't begin to worry until I was driving home.

The news was not good. She had been diagnosed with stage two lung cancer a couple of years prior and she had been diagnosed with 100% calcification of her heart recently. She had contacted Medical Aid in Dying (MAID) in Canada to arrange a peaceful death at the end of June.

Judith was my mother's baby sister. She was only twelve years older than I am. I was a flower girl at her wedding. She was, without a question, a force to be reckoned with. She lived large. She had a remarkable, almost unimaginable zest for living. She married at 18 and after having two children her husband was diagnosed with schizophrenia and he was institutionalized. His prognosis was not good, and she was advised by both lawyers and doctors to divorce him so he could return to the U.S. and get care close to his parents. This was the late 50's in Canada. You didn't just get divorced. She was a pragmatist. She packed up and "moved" to Reno where you could get a divorce, no questions asked, if you could prove six weeks of residency.

My aunt was an exceptionally beautiful woman. Between marriages she did some modeling. Once she was mistaken for Elizabeth Taylor as she exited an airplane. She was on the same plane with Elizabeth



Miriam Jerris with her aunt, Judith Rockert

Taylor and Richard Burton and someone on the plane called ahead and alerted the press. Those traveling with the stars got wind of the leak, so Liz and Richard remained on the airplane. When my aunt disembarked, with her two small children, the cameras began to flash.

Her personality was magnetic. People were drawn to her and she to them. If Judith met someone in the grocery line, before they said goodbye, she would know an extraordinary amount of information about them. She asked many questions and because she was authentically and enthusiastically interested, strangers shared a staggering amount of personal information with her.

In her early thirties, Judith was flying on her own. When they fed her dinner, she put the salad dressing on the salad, and although aware she had allergies, she had no idea they were so severe, nor did she realize that there were poppy seeds in the salad dressing. She went into anaphylactic shock and luckily there was a doctor on board who had an EpiPen and that saved her life. Her condition took over her life and she became allergic to many things, but my aunt was an organizer and a planner, and she figured out how she could live and eat safely in many situations for eighty-four

years. She was determined not to die from anaphylaxis.

Some years after her first marriage ended, she met the man who would become her next husband. Together, they started a travel agency that catered primarily to companies that brought employees together from all over the world. I told you my aunt was organized, and this career was ideal for someone so capable of managing multiple details. She loved to travel and I'm sure I caught the bug from her. She found that she could travel safely on cruise ships. They would cook for her and protect her from the things she was allergic to.

When her son was in his early twenties, he attempted suicide. He was soon diagnosed with schizophrenia. For the next few decades, he was in and out of facilities. He regularly attempted suicide when he was not hospitalized. He was in unimaginable emotional pain and so was my aunt. Unless you knew her very well, you would not have known the extent of her suffering. She kept that information to herself and a few close confidants. One Passover she was at my house and received a phone call telling her that her son had finally been successful and ended his life. There were many examples in her life that cemented her belief that living with unbearable pain, physical or emotional, was not worth it, and definitely not something she wanted for herself.

Just before her fiftieth birthday, she divorced. She was unencumbered for the first time since she was a child. From then on, she explored – everything. She started exploring her own life and confronted some of the negative decisions she had made and why. She traveled where she could. She met interesting people. She took mind-expanding seminars. She made decisions that enhanced her life. All of her nieces vacationed with her at one time or another.

By now you know my aunt was organized. She was also extraordinarily controlling and self-centered. Because she was so genuinely interested in others these traits sometimes



## Tell me dear ones

*Tell me dear one, tell me wise one,  
Is it the destiny of each generation  
To watch the decay & destruction of  
The souls of their  
Forefathers, their Mothers & Fathers  
Of their brothers and sisters  
Of their Aunts, Uncles  
And dear lifelong friends?  
Is it their destiny  
To observe this disintegration, as they age?*

*What if I don't want to go there?  
What if I don't want MY loved ones to be witness to  
what I want to leave before  
is tearing apart of the person they once knew  
Is no more  
And all that remains is a little piece,  
A little dribble,  
A shell, a shadow of the original?*

*Is it OK to leave before  
once vivid and vital  
Valuable person they held dear,  
is gone away?  
— J.R., 2022*

*I learned a long time ago. You can  
either live in fear or love, and I chose  
to live in love. And so, I've surrounded  
myself with incredibly loving people,  
bright people, consciousness-raising  
people. I understand what I do and  
why I do it...*

*I don't want chemo. I don't want  
radiation. I don't want anything.  
Let me die peacefully. I've had the  
most incredible life. I have had  
adventures, wonderful people  
coming and going, and I have no  
regrets.*

*For years, my calendar was empty.  
I never went out. I never saw anybody,  
like everybody else during COVID.  
But now, it is just incredible... I'm just  
getting so much nourishment. I said I  
really wanted the last days of my life  
to be escalating bliss, and I am getting  
it. I am overflowing. It's just yummy.*

And that was exactly what I observed –  
so much love, so much authenticity and so  
much dignity. ❧

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### Three generations

balanced her forcefulness. Her relationships were intense and so

She was particularly sensitive to those who needed her guidance and her enormous presence. For all of us know, boundaries in relationships are important. She was one of those people who needed boundaries more than others. I was able to work through my issues with her and lucked out. I was with her until the end.

The last ten years of her life, she suffered with disabling back pain and then the pandemic. Her relationships were important and significant, although the isolation combined was making it more and more difficult for her. She watched friends and relatives suffer and that was not for her. She suffered in her life, and she did not want to suffer in her death. With her heart diagnosis, she had found her exit.

Judith shared her thoughts and clearly explained her position (see sidebar).

My commitment to death with dignity is many decades old. The Humanist movement has taken the stand to support individuals in their right to die. In 1995, the Secular Humanistic Jewish movement's leadership group affirmed the right of individuals to have assistance in dying. In 2013 the Society wrote resolutions supporting physician-assisted dying. (Links to these statements can be found on the additional resources page for this issue at: <http://bit.ly/HJ-Fall2023>).

Once I learned of Judith's condition, my family gathered for her memorial service over Memorial Day to spend time with her.

My daughter joined me as Judith's daughter. We gathered for her memorial service. It was a time for crying and laughing and sharing. My favorite part of the evening was when she sat in a chair and said, "Ask me anything!" It was deeply meaningful and full of authentic emotion.

We gathered for her memorial service. It was a time for crying and laughing and sharing. My favorite part of the evening was when she sat in a chair and said, "Ask me anything!" It was deeply meaningful and full of authentic emotion. We gathered for her memorial service. It was a time for crying and laughing and sharing. My favorite part of the evening was when she sat in a chair and said, "Ask me anything!" It was deeply meaningful and full of authentic emotion.

The day of her death was Monday, June 27. I asked to be present. My aunt interviewed me to make sure I'd be okay seeing her die. I passed the test and was honored to bear witness. She died quickly and peacefully. Her face was relaxed.

Just recently MAID published their Annual Report. My aunt was interviewed. This is an excerpt from the interview:



## What Tradition Can Teach Us About Dealing with Loss

BY RABBI JEFFREY L. FALICK

For many Jews, past and present, life is guided by the Jewish religious legal system (*halakha*). It governs everything from how they eat to when they work to how they celebrate to how they mourn. As cultural Jews, *halakha* has little claim on our lives. Yet that does not mean that it has nothing to teach us. I have found that in their prescriptions for how to deal with death, its framers revealed keen emotional intelligence. Even the most secular of Jews might benefit from the traditions they created and nurtured, especially in the aftermath of a loss.

Almost everyone who has encountered a death in a Jewish community has heard about the custom of *shiva*. But outside of religious Jewish circles few people really understand its significance in the series of mourning rituals. We secular and Humanistic Jews tend to think of it as simply the visitation period after a Jewish funeral, held at the homes of mourners for any length of time. Tradition, however, positioned *shiva* somewhat differently, regarding it as the period that initiates a sequence of mourning periods that, in some ways, last a lifetime. The prescribed minutiae of what takes place and when (covered mirrors or sitting on low

benches) are generally irrelevant to Humanistic Jews. And yet, I believe that when it comes to the traditional mourning calendar, there remains relevant wisdom to draw from for our communities.

It begins in the immediate aftermath of a death. That's when the bereaved must make arrangements for burial (cremation is not a traditional option). Tradition calls this period *aninut*. It is a time when all normal religious obligations are suspended so that the survivors can make necessary arrangements. This is but one reason that traditional funerals usually take place as quickly as possible, though even Orthodox Jews delay them to allow for travel. Once the funeral is over, the period of *shiva* begins. Mourners return to their home or wherever they are staying to find a "Meal of Comfort" awaiting. The prescribed length of *shiva* is in its name. It translates simply as "seven," the number of days during which mourners are ensconced where they dwell.

The days of *shiva* reveal the power of communal support, permitting mourners to concentrate on their grief when it is at its most intense. Food comes to them. People come to them. Religious services—required to recite the Mourners' Kaddish—come to

them. Some mourners may choose to attend Shabbat services at synagogue, but if they do not, even that service comes to them. There are a variety of rules and customs that govern visits, but none is more important than the necessity that, in the immediacy of death, community members prioritize showing up. Visitors need not even express condolences. Some sages actually forbade it! It's their presence that counts. On the seventh day, at whatever time the mourners are ready, they may leave the house. Some start with a walk around the block.

Following *shiva*, mourners enter a period called *sh'loshim*, meaning "thirty." Inclusive of *shiva*, these twenty-three days are a time to slowly re-enter life. Tradition places all kinds of restrictions on mourners during this time. What they all basically come down to is recognizing that attempts to force life back to feel normal so soon after loss are generally fruitless. For Humanistic Jews, this wisdom of the *sh'loshim* may be the most helpful. Mourning takes time. We must allow ourselves to take that time even as we slowly resume the obligations of everyday life.

The *sh'loshim* period flows into the remainder of the year. For another eleven months, tradition requires the daily recitation of the Mourners' Kaddish. Unlike the vast majority of Jewish prayers, the Mourners' Kaddish requires a *minyan*, a quorum of ten. Lacking an obligation to a mourner who needs to recite it, many people simply say their daily prayers at home. But when



# Keri'ah: Rips in Life's Fabric

BY RABBI ADAM CHALOM

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there is even one person in a community who is obligated to its daily recital, every traditional community will ensure that a *minyan* is present! This communal commitment to the mourner is so strong that people will organize phone trees and send out daily emails to ensure that every service. Given that Humanistic Jews don't see ourselves as obligated to recite the Mourners' Kaddish, what can we learn from this tradition?

Even without that obligation, we share a commitment to the power of community with Jews across the spectrum of beliefs. Our community is here to offer those who experience loss. To act in the spirit of tradition, we offer nothing more from us than to reach out and offer our communal support.

After one year has passed since a loss, traditional and Humanistic Jewish mourners alike observe *shiva*. *Shiva* will be an annual observance throughout their lives, acknowledging the reality that while the pain of loss may initially become less overwhelming with every passing year. Traditionally, on each occasion by lighting a *shiva* candle, as they were obligated to do during the first year, reciting the *shema* prayer with a *minyan*. Similarly, Humanistic Jews who belong to a Jewish community frequently make a point of attending the Shabbat service where their loved ones' names will be recited.

No matter how it's observed, the annual *yahrzeit* remains a moment for Jews of all backgrounds. It offers an opportunity to fulfill words that mourners frequently utter in the shadow of death; that the memory of those whom they have lost will be a blessing. It offers an opportunity to welcome in each anniversary of past happiness that bring with them a moment of comfort.

For secular and Humanistic Jews, decisions about whether or how to incorporate any of this into our lives are highly personal. Yet regardless of whether any particular ritual fits our own lifestyle, I believe there are still valuable insights revealed by these traditional customs. Perhaps their wisdom can be of some help at those times when we must re-enter life in the shadow of death. ❖

In the pilot episode of *Six Feet Under*, the patriarch of a family of undertakers dies in a car accident. While at a service call and frightened, another crew member is unjustly and literally gets his hands dirty by grabbing one correct way to mourn, of course, but we can agree with Ecclesiastes 3 that there is "a time for restraint and a time to demonstrate the pain we feel."

The loss of a loved one leaves a hole in our hearts, however we choose to show it. The Jewish tradition of *keri'ah* [meant "tearing"] is a way to show grief by anguishing one's clothes. It may have been a culturally expected in dozens of Biblical passages describing tearing clothing in response to tragedy. For those who choose to observe *keri'ah* meaningfully for Humanistic Jews as an outward expression of our inner pain.

As usual with Jewish tradition, there are boundaries to *keri'ah* we are free to accept or go beyond. *Keri'ah* was traditionally required for the seven closest mourning relations: spouse, mother or father. Humanistic Jews within those categories may choose whether or not to do *keri'ah* (specific relationships are also extended to include non-Jewish family members). The conventional phrase recited while tearing is "*Barukh dayan emet* – Blessed is the true Judge," a praise of God and divine justice in what has happened. We prefer to use "*zekher tsaddikenu hu* – memory of our righteous ancestor is upon us." Some restrict the wearing of ribbons to the seven days of *shiva* observance; others choose to wear them for longer or shorter periods. And so on.

Humanistic Jews choose to observe Jewish rituals that meet their psychological and emotional needs. Celebrated with Humanistic language and framing, practices like *keri'ah* can provide comfort, a sense of roots, and a connection to other mourners. Symbolic rituals can be a meaningful part of a healing Humanistic Jewish mourning process. ❖

# CONVERSATIONS

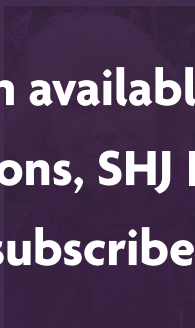
## Finding Humanistic Judaism

Arlene Gerwin reflects on losing her husband and their spiritual path

Page 16 cut from this preview edition.

INTERVIEWED BY SHEILA MALCOLM

The theme of this issue sparked my memory of Arlene Gerwin finding Beth Ami – Colorado Humanistic Judaism after hearing an End of Life presentation at the Boulder JCC in 2016. Arlene is a Board member and active contributor to our community. Her personal loss brought her to the Humanistic Jewish fold and that I was able to interview her for this issue. – Sheila Malcolm, Madrikha



SHEILA MALCOLM

Prior to discovering Humanistic Judaism, what did your own Jewish journey include? My family belonged to a conservative congregation where my twin brothers had a Bar Mitzvah but my dad did not believe in Bar Mitzvahs for girls. He

My husband James died on February 22, 2016, from pancreatic cancer. He was only 69 years old and we were happily married for 46 years. He was over 75 attendees of our immediate family, friends and our Boulder friends. We spread James' ashes on Father's Day

no longer felt guilty about not following traditional Jewish customs: no burial the next day, no sitting shiva, no covering all the mirrors, no tombstone placed eleven months after death. I am at ease with what I did and how I mourned and grieved.

*How has Beth Ami continued to meet your needs for an authentic Jewish practice?*

As an active member of Beth Ami, I have found a Jewish community of like-minded, thoughtful, and wise individuals. Now I feel like I am naturally not religiously Jewish. I remember many of the Jewish songs from my youth that we sing at Beth Ami. It has been the edited and reworded versions, and I admit to sometimes slipping back and singing the traditional prayers. At Beth Ami, I feel right at home.

*I have officiated memorial services for strangers, acquaintances, relatives, my mother... Each service is unique in content, reflecting the requests of the departed and their family members. In retrospect, what would you have included in a Humanistic Jewish ceremony for James?*

If I knew you 7 years ago, I would have asked that you officiate at James' memorial service. Other than my brother-in-law quietly saying I included more relevant readings and collections. I wish I had a copy then of *Here is Our Light*, the book you co-edited. I now frequently turn to the book and read passages at my own Passover Seders and Shabbats.

*Other thoughts?*

Beth Ami's Mission Statement fits my own beliefs and Jewishness perfectly: *Beth Ami celebrates Jewish holidays, learning and life cycle events through the secular lens of history, culture and reason.* 🌟

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Beth Ami celebrates Jewish holidays, learning and life cycle events through the secular lens of history, culture and reason.

did allow me to attend Hebrew school where I learned to read but not understand Hebrew. I raised my own family in Chappaqua, New York where we went to a Conservative temple. Our selection was based on what Jewish congregation provided after-school bus service to Hebrew school. My husband James and I moved to Boulder Colorado in 2002 after our sons graduated from college. We never thought about joining a Jewish congregation now that our sons were on their own.

*How did you choose to honor your husband's passing?*

James' family expected a traditional Conservative Jewish funeral but James'

2016 on his favorite hiking trail when our sons and their families could travel to Boulder. And James' brother joined us and did say the

*When we met after my 2016 presentation at the JCC, I was struck by your positive, energetic response to a fairly somber theme and follow-up discussion. What caused that reaction on your part?*

I first heard of Humanistic Judaism when I listened to you speak about Humanistic Jewish burial customs. I felt you were speaking directly to me. You validated what I did to celebrate my husband's life, not dwelling on mourning his death. I



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Heather Rigby

Eamon Riley  
Peggy Robin  
Carl Rod  
Holly Roos  
Lauren Rosato & Jonathan Marcus  
Daniel Rose  
Beth Rosenthal  
Natalie Rosinsky & Donald Larsson  
Ester Rozenblum & Alberto Grosmark  
Luis Israel Barajas Ruiz  
Lawrence Russ  
Mary Samson  
Jack Sandberg  
John Sanders  
BJ & Richard Saul  
Martine Saul  
Susan & Jeffrey Schesno  
Eilene Schiller  
Erika & Tom Schultzy  
Alisa Schwartz  
Tamar & Ronald Schwartz  
Kevin Segall  
Mimi & Michael Shaw  
Arthur Shostak  
Tamara Sharoff  
Brandi Sinco  
Matthew Singer  
Steven Small  
Cheryl Smith  
Maura Smith-Mitsky  
Natalie Sokoloff & Fred Pincus  
Edwin Sonier Acosta Tulande  
Andree Sonsino  
Joshua Steinberg  
Emily Stern  
Elizabeth Sullivan  
Kellie Taft  
Jose Tafur  
Rabbi Frank Tamburello  
Clifton Thompson  
William Thompson & Joshua Morgan  
Jonathan Thunderword  
Jack Thurmond  
Ann Toffel  
Lindsey R Valente  
Jerid Vallejo  
Roz Van Kleeck  
Alvin Wainhaus  
Judith Wank  
Nancy Waters & Benjamin Lieberman  
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Phyllis White  
Andrea Wolf  
Kathryn Wolf  
Henry Wolfond  
Vladimir Yampolsky  
Paula Young & Jeff Treistman

Robert Zanelli  
Marian Zuckerman  
Sharon Zweiback  
Anonymous

## Community Gifts

Beth Adam Kids School  
Kahal B'raira, Boston Congregation  
for Humanistic Judaism  
Secular Humanist Jewish Circle

## Heritage Circle

### Planned estate gifts

Karel\* & Sheila Bass Fund for  
New Community Development  
Arthur\* & Catherine Bernstein  
Elgie Ginsburgh  
Deborah & David Godden  
Jennifer & Gerald\* Grodsky  
Ronald Hirsch  
Rabbi Miriam Jerris  
Daniel Schecter  
Art Segal  
David Steinberg  
Varley Family Bequest

## Lifetime Members

M. Shaheed Aadam  
Sheila Bass  
Rafael Bermudez Perez  
Ida Braun  
Ariela Gottsegen  
Hannah Gottsegen  
Samantha Gottsegen  
Rachel Hafemann  
Edward James  
Mary & George Johnson  
David Milan  
Ruth Milan  
Susan Milan  
Jerid Morisco & Gelso Rosa  
Aaron Morris  
Dylan Morris  
Shawn Morris  
Elizabeth Prommer & Ulrich Hienzsch  
Kaylyn & Daniel Schiff  
Karen Smith  
Oliver Sümnick  
Travis Svensson  
Anonymous

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\*deceased





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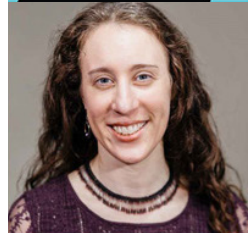
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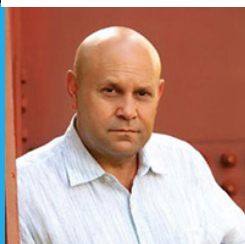
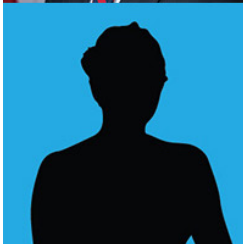
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The Spinoza Havurah\*

 Established Community

 Community in Formation\*

