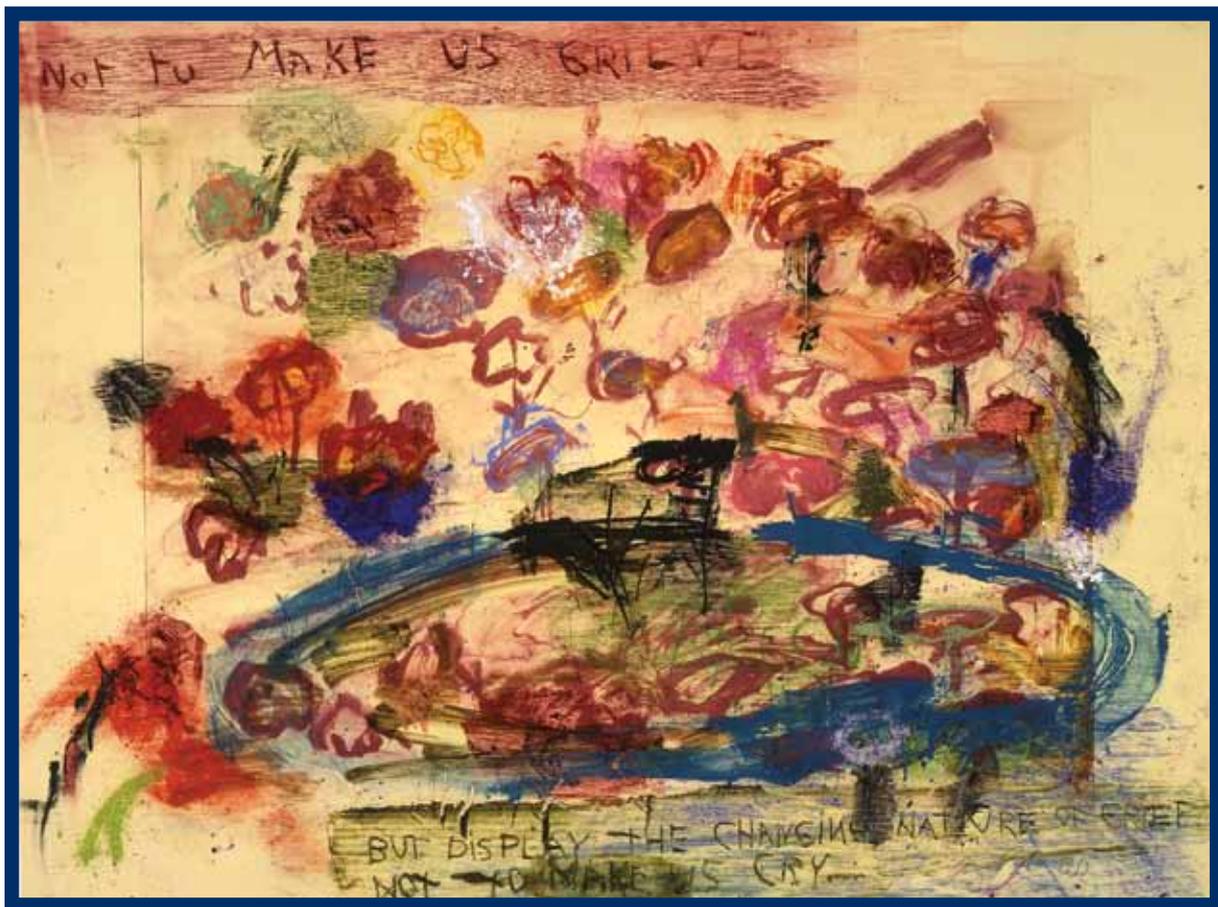


FEMINIST FU



"Field of Flowers II" Joan Snyder. Photo: Zindman/Fremont

Reclaiming the ultimate ritual, visionary women are taking this ceremonial passage into their own hands.

by AMY STONE

NERALS

One of those rare days in June—blue sky, soft breeze, cool shade from the grand old buildings lining Manhattan’s Upper West Side—it seemed every woman of a certain age walking up West End Avenue wearing a long flowered skirt and outrageous earrings was heading for Ellen Rafel’s funeral.

Ellen Rafel died last June at the age of 63. A non-smoker, she defied death for two and a half years after being diagnosed with lung cancer. She had enough time to fight as hard as she could, and then have the last word on her own funeral.

Rafel was deeply Jewish, deeply spiritual, but not particularly observant. When she turned up at the Ma’yan Rosh Chodesh group at the JCC in Manhattan, her hair was lost to chemotherapy but in her signature mismatched earrings she still looked herself. When Rafel was first diagnosed, friends began to turn up at her apartment every Monday night to sing. By the week before she died, the folk singing for Ellen had grown into a chorus of 150, mostly women.

As her husband, Erwin Frankel, tells it, her funeral preparations were “part Jewish ritual, part feminist ritual, part Ellen’s ritual.” The traditional ritual purification—the washing of the body before burial known as *tahara*—was done not in a funeral parlor but at home by her sister, a niece, and a good friend. Defying tradition, she was buried in a red caftan and a selection of non-matching earrings, and for the traditional round-the-clock *shmira*—“the watching,” in which someone sits with the body until the funeral—Rafel had designated six of her closest women friends.

The care Ellen Rafel took to prepare for her own death and funeral would perhaps seem strange in our death-denying culture where only gay men stricken with AIDS back when it was a death sentence planned their own funerals. But this still-taboo subject is beginning to open up for discussion.

Rafel’s long-time friend Janice Rous, a founder of the Ma’yan Rosh Chodesh group, said, “We’d been through everything over the years except the death of one of our members. Feminism created an opening for people like Ellen to ask deep theological questions as a woman.” Rous, who describes herself as “a lay spiritual leader,” said Rafel fought for life. But “when there was nothing left of her physical life as she knew it, she had to surrender.”

As women who shaped and were deeply shaped by the women’s movement confront death, surrender may seem like turning feminism on its head. Letting go was not in the lexicon of living

life on our own terms, feeling we could change the world, defiantly letting it be known “I am woman, hear me roar.”

Baby boomers are still very much part of America’s youth culture, feeling that if we eat healthfully, drink a glass of red wine at dinner, exercise and find the right doctors, we can overcome aging. Death is not on the agenda. But as we get into our 50s and 60s, our concerns shift from egalitarian marriage ceremonies and baby-naming rituals to divorce, to the death of a parent, to realizing that we’ve become our parents and that we are now the elders.

In her essay “The Pink Tallit,” Rabbi Elyse Goldstein writes, “A woman once said to me, ‘If I never had a bat mitzvah and I never got married, the only ritual I’d have would be my funeral.’ The Jewish feminist movement has filled the gaps in the life cycle, marking a wide variety of occasions.”

But that may not be enough.

Death and mourning, this last piece of the life cycle, is finally being examined with a feminist consciousness. But most of the women involved see their experience as deeply personal, not part of an emerging shared consciousness. Often a daughter arranging a parent’s care, a granddaughter writing a eulogy, a social worker counseling a family or a rabbi preparing to help bury one of her congregants thinks she is dealing with these issues personally and individually. Women looking at death and mourning through a feminist lens are not yet connecting the dots.

Unless they’re Orthodox. For Orthodox Jewish feminists the issues are stunningly clear. Orthodox women still face an obstacle course in saying the mourner’s kaddish in public, at the mercy of the male minyan as to whether their kaddish will be answered with an acknowledging “amen” (See pages 26 and 29).

REDISCOVERING THE BURIAL SOCIETY

Perhaps the most deeply intimate and rarely talked of aspect of Jewish burial is *tahara*, the ritual purification of the body before burial by the *chevra kadisha* (“Holy society”). Women wash women; men wash men.

If no men are available, women can wash men, but not vice-versa. Not surprisingly, the earliest known burial societies, starting in 16th century Prague, were men-only organizations where membership was coveted. For obvious reasons, women’s auxiliaries were necessary, and men and women have long been equal members.

"In a chevra kadisha, no man is telling women what to do. Women have to be able to lift the body, turn the body, remove tubes as complete equals, not as second-class citizens," said David Zinner, executive director of Kavod v'Nichum. The organization's name means "honor and comfort"—two essential aspects of the chevra kadisha. The non-profit resource group, founded in 2001, appeals to Jews of all persuasions who want to restore traditional Jewish death and mourning practices. According to Zinner, women outnumbered men two to one at this year's North American Chevra Kadisha and Jewish Cemetery Conference in Berkeley in early June.

While the Orthodox have often held to the simple preparation for burial by a chevra kadisha, America's more assimilated Jews gave up the handling of the dead to the funeral home professionals. They were following "the American way of death," the title of Jessica Mitford's 1963 attack on the profit-driven American funeral industry.

Feminism's flowering in the 1960s and '70s coincided with those decades' distrust of the establishment. Now a new interest in the chevra kadisha may be starting to take back death from the funeral establishment. Even without Kavod v'Nichum, Jewishly knowledgeable women are finding their way to tahara.

Letty Cottin Pogrebin, a founder of Ms. magazine and long-time writer on issues feminist and Jewish, recently helped her sister, nephews and niece prepare her brother-in-law's body at home after the local chevra kadisha in Newton, Massachusetts, refused to do tahara because her brother-in-law wanted to be cremated.

Pogrebin went on the Internet and printed out the kaddish, in the Hebrew and its English transliteration. Family members modestly washed the body, then each lit a seven-day candle to mark the beginning of the shiva period. After Pogrebin led the family in reciting the kaddish, they all held hands and formed a circle around the body to say their goodbyes.

"Feminism gave me the courage to create meaningful alternative rituals that are rooted in our tradition but better address human needs," Pogrebin said. "I believe God accepted the holy intent and spiritual authenticity of our transgressive tahara ceremony even though the form was not quite right. I'd like all Jews who feel alienated or excluded from strict Orthodox practices to take it upon themselves to revisit death rituals with the same revolutionary bravery and transformational fervor that feminists applied to changing other traditions that excluded women of our community." When a well-known and prolific feminist writer such as Pogrebin finds her way into tahara, you can expect she will spread the word.

Without the rituals of death already on the feminist radar, Pogrebin probably did not know of singer-songwriter Debbie Friedman's response after her 92-year-old grandmother died in Palm Springs, California, in 1992. When Friedman phoned the local funeral home to ask about tahara and the response was not consolation but "That'll cost \$150," Friedman took matters into her own hands. The women who performed tahara with her were the rabbi who headed the chevra kadisha in St. Louis, the rabbi's partner, and, to Friedman's amazement, her own mother, whom

THE JEWISH WAY OF DEATH

Pre-dating ultra-Orthodox interpretations, the traditional Jewish funeral is simple, egalitarian, respectful toward the dead and wonderfully attuned psychologically to the needs of the living. A chevra kadisha washes the dead in the purification ritual of tahara, wraps the dead in simple shrouds, puts the body into a plain wooden box (in Israel there is no coffin), and watches over the deceased from death until burial. Burial is done as soon as possible. Traditionally, cremation is not permitted.

After the funeral service with its eulogy, family members or friends carry the casket, lowering it into the earth. Mourners shovel dirt to fill the grave. They then recite the burial kaddish.

After burial, concern shifts from the deceased to the living. Mourners sit shiva (literally, "seven") for a week; they light a seven-day candle, and a mourners' minyan is held in the home.

Mourning continues beyond shiva for a total of 30 days from the burial. Traditionally, kaddish is recited for 30 days for a spouse, a child or a sibling. For a parent, kaddish is traditionally recited for 11 months and one day by a son of the deceased. A tombstone is erected after shiva, generally within a year. While outside Orthodox Judaism all the elements of traditional mourning are available to women—delivering the eulogy, conducting the shiva services, saying kaddish—Orthodox women are among those who most passionately want to observe the traditions from which they have been barred.

As the editors of the JOFA (Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance) booklet "The Orthodox Jewish Woman and Ritual: Options and Opportunities for Death & Mourning" put it: "It is hard to imagine a woman writing the far-ranging work that Leon Wieseltier authored on the kaddish, complete with scholarly notes on the purpose and content of the prayer. A book authored by a woman would be less concerned with the symbolism of the kaddish, and mainly occupied with the logistics of saying kaddish in different synagogues, and the relative degrees of hospitality and inhospitality afforded." While most Ashkenazi Orthodox rabbis now allow women the public role of giving a eulogy, many American Sephardic communities still discourage women from speaking at funerals.

“Jewish customs of mourning are deeply feminist, blending canon with creativity, the psychological with the legal.”

—Arlene Agus

she considers timid about death. (Friedman’s beloved “bubbe” is the elderly woman on the cover of her popular album “And You Shall Be a Blessing.”)

While her song based on the *Mi sheberach* prayer for healing has become a regular in many congregations, Friedman, 58, has not yet created music for prayers associated with death. She may be ready, saying, “How ironic. The only time there’s a specific prayer for women is when we’re dead—*El Maleh Rachamim*,” the traditional funeral chant. And the healing message of *Mi sheberach* could well be part of a final healing message that has nothing to do with recovery.

For women accustomed to worship where women and men share all ritual roles side by side, the separation of the sexes in the chevra kadisha can involve a feminist rethinking. Elisheva Urbas, a member of Manhattan’s Anshe Chesed synagogue chevra kadisha—one of only four non-Orthodox chevra kadishas in New York City—said, “It’s an interesting way to reclaim women’s spaces. There’s an element in gender separation that in this case kind of makes women free, a rare pleasure in a liberal community that, for good reason, doesn’t have a lot of gender-segregated religious spaces.”

For some women, Jewish feminist organizing has led directly to creating an egalitarian or “progressive” (i.e., non-Orthodox) chevra kadisha, where women are not bound by the requirements of Orthodox womanhood, such as observing kashrut and niddah, “the laws of family purity.”

Malke Frank, a co-founder of the Jewish Women’s Center of Pittsburgh, which introduced Rosh Chodesh observance, feminist seders and new rituals to an enthusiastic following, decided with a few other women to start a non-Orthodox chevra kadisha. They and the men in their chevra kadisha post the prayers and readings in Hebrew and English in the tahara room, enabling members not fluent in Hebrew to lead the team.

Frank, 66, said, “We see our mission not just to do taharat but to be an educational resource. Most Jews only find out about tahara when they’re sitting across from a funeral director.”

While some may consider the work of the chevra kadisha almost akin to a secret society, resources with a feminist consciousness are available on the Internet. The Pittsburgh chevra kadisha uses the Park Slope (Brooklyn) Jewish Center *Hevra Kadisha Taharah Manual*, compiled by Rabbi Regina Sandler-Phillips (<http://www.jewish-funerals.org/PSJCTaharahManual.pdf>). Drawing from Sephardic tradition, Sandler-Phillips includes songs and wordless niggunim to be sung throughout the ritual. Her translations are generally non-sexist.

Some chevra kadisha groups have formed in response to the needs of a single member. At Temple Beth El in northern

California’s coastal town of Eureka, when Devorah Davis Mann, one of the more traditional women in the congregation, was diagnosed with cancer, she let her final wishes be known. Rabbi Naomi Steinberg described taking on the challenge as “an intense feminist story—a group of women coming together to support her in her illness in her request for a traditional Jewish burial.” Steinberg said, “The women were motivated to organize, though it all seemed fairly abstract till we realized our friend wasn’t going to make it.” When Devorah Davis Mann died at

42, her body was the first to be cared for by the Beth El chevra kadisha. She was buried with her tallit and kippah.

Steinberg, 57, who co-teaches a class on women and religion at Humboldt State University, said, “Reclaiming the practice of tahara is an empowerment issue. Would this have come to pass without women rabbis—women taking initiative and leading in the custom of chevra kadisha? Do we put the body in the hands of a professional, who in the past has been a man? Or do we put it in our own hands? Handling the beloved dead is a profoundly empowering experience.”

The members bring a California consciousness to the mitzvah of honoring the dead. Nicole Barchilon Frank, who has led the Beth El chevra kadisha since its start a dozen years ago, is eloquent on the spiritual joys of tahara. If possible, the deceased are washed in their own backyards, with the birds and sky above, and buckets of water flowing “like a waterfall.” She has added her own ritual before returning to her family after caring for the dead: a mikvah dip in the Pacific Ocean. At 45, married with three children ranging from 12 to 24, she believes “whenever women are doing something powerful, it’s feminist.”

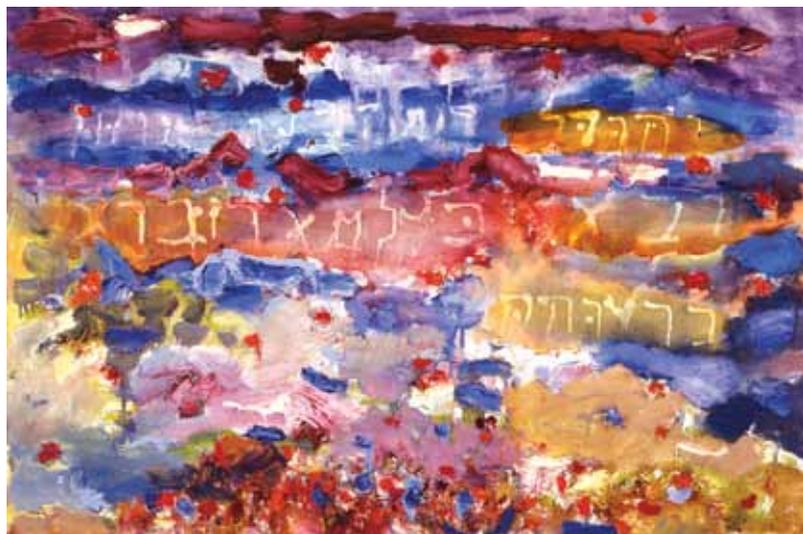
Comfortable with death, on her most recent birthday, she sent a letter to her family making clear how she wants to be buried. “I was a little nervous sending it out to everyone: ‘Here’s my birthday letter. It’s all about my death.’” She has no plans to leave any time soon; but she wants to make sure her wishes are clear. The letter gives loving instruction on the steps in performing tahara and the ongoing vigil from death to burial.

WHERE ARE THE WOMEN?

While tahara is still largely the domain of the Jewish funeral establishment, one aspect of honoring the dead—accessible to all, no training needed—remains strangely untouched by women. Pallbearing seems to stay in the male domain, though a return to Judaism’s traditional plain pine box may make the job seem less difficult.

Laura Geller, senior rabbi of Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills, has yet to succeed in encouraging change. “Even in a Reform synagogue, the family chooses men for pallbearers,” she said. “If I knew the woman and think there should be women pallbearers, the family still wants men pallbearers.”

But spontaneous change may be coming. Sherry Birnbaum, the social worker who directs Jewish programs at Westchester Jewish Community Services in White Plains, N.Y., described the funeral of a dear friend. On that snowy day she looked at the



Kaddish for Lilly, JOAN SNYDER, 1999.

"I made this painting for a woman named Lilly who was once a close friend of mine. She was a therapist, a great lover of opera, and a Holocaust survivor. Lilly was a very complex person who over the course of years antagonized almost everyone she knew. I made the painting for her because when she died I worried that no one had said Kaddish for her. And so this is Kaddish, for Lilly."

pallbearers—all men—and thought, "The women played such a caring role in the hospital. We can't not escort her out." And then, without a word, the women converged around the pallbearers, "like a color guard" of dear friends giving the deceased a final honor.

Geller has been more successful in moving congregants toward non-formulaic eulogies. In what may be revisionist food for thought, she believes serious study of *Eshet Hayil* (the "Woman of Valor" shabbat hymn that has become standard fare at many women's funerals) reveals not a role-bound woman but "quite a powerful image of a very strong woman engaged in the world." This positive view could be a generational shift; Geller, 59, says her own mother protested the hymn. Taking the sting out of *Eshet Hayil*, Geller said there are mystical interpretations of *Eshet Hayil* as the Shekhinah, the female aspect of God; another interpretation sees each verse relating to one of our women ancestors. "So I've changed my feeling."

Geller, whose congregation numbers some 1,000 families, sees a "feminist funeral as claiming our own personal stories. It's only not feminist if it's generic. The same is true for men. If you take seriously the unique story of a person's life, if well done it frames the Torah of that person's life in the Torah of tradition." Critical of books of generic eulogies, Geller said, "That's where feminism has made a difference—real women with real stories."

Even with Beverly Hills' proximity to Hollywood, Geller said that feminist stories have yet to appear in any of the videos made to honor the memory of women of the congregation. Jill Glasband, director of community outreach at Hillside Memorial Park and Mortuary in Los Angeles, agrees. She has seen plenty of other changes since she married into the

Glasband mortuary business more than 30 years ago. Glasband, 65, the only woman to have served as president of the Jewish Funeral Directors Association (a subject worth examination unto itself), said she's starting to see families bring a woman's tallit for her to be buried in but has yet to see a consciously feminist funeral.

Glasband, whose cemetery is owned by Temple Israel of Hollywood, said she'll often suggest a woman rabbi, especially if the deceased is a woman.

TAKING ON KADDISH

As the baby boomers bury our parents, we may be ignorant of Jewish rituals other than the mourner's kaddish and the practice of sitting shiva. For grieving women, kaddish can be the great reminder that parts of Judaism remain a man's world. Ironically, although Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist Judaism hold no barriers to women saying kaddish, relatively few non-Orthodox go

through the complete kaddish cycle. And if they want to say kaddish daily for the traditional 11 months and a day, they may have to seek out a "shiva minyan" at an Orthodox shul. Attempting to be part of the minyan, they often find themselves not only vulnerable strangers in a strange land but unwelcome behind the mehitzah, the divider between women's and men's sections of the congregation.

Peeling away custom, Orthodox women have found that it is halakhically acceptable not to have a curtain dividing men from women at the mourners' minyan at home. They are also starting to have the courage to request that in a home minyan men make space for women's prayers outside the kitchen.

As Jewish women start giving thought to our own funerals, at least one has laid out a scenario for avoiding family conflict at the shiva minyan following her own death (may it be long in coming). Writer Nessa Rapoport, author of the 1994 collection of poems *A Woman's Book of Grieving*, said, with her deep belief in an egalitarian minyan, she foresees "double minyanim" at her shiva, one egalitarian and one Modern Orthodox. She explained, "I wouldn't want my family to be denied the comfort of their beliefs as Modern Orthodox Jews, but I couldn't bear that women not have aliyot, when I've devoted my life to halakhic equality. It was at the shiva for my beloved friend and teacher Rabbi Wolfe Kelman that I first saw this model enacted within one loving family."

For the daily kaddish minyan, the Orthodox world can be cruel to both unprepared and knowledgeable women. Esther Broner's *Mornings and Mourning* recounts her combative 11 months in 1987 saying kaddish for her father in a Manhattan neighborhood "kaddish synagogue."

On the rituals of birth and death, Broner, 81—whose 1993 memoir, *The Telling: The Story of a Group of Jewish Women Who Journey to Spirituality Through Community and Ceremony*, documented the creation of the first feminist seders—said, “I think we can lay claim to a lot. Women have traditionally been the birthers and the buryers—the two great occasions of our lives.” She wants lamentations to return to funeral rituals and can imagine a chorus of women tracing the deceased’s matrilineage—“not just bereaved women quietly weeping in the front rows of the funeral parlor.”

Broner explained, “It’s a painful thing but it has to do with taking public responsibility. It’s a womanly thing to do—a chorus.” And perhaps the same way that the feminist seders Broner and Letty Cottin Pogrebin and a small coterie of other feminist leaders launched 34 years ago paved the way for what is now commonplace in congregations around the globe, so will women’s new or re-purposed end-of-life rituals and ceremonies eventually enter the mainstream.

BIRTH OF A NEW RITUAL, BEYOND THE HALLMARK PLATITUDES

One of Jewish feminism’s great strengths has been doing the serious scholarly digging needed to breathe life into old rituals and develop new ones. Back in 1971, Arlene Agus brought to light the ancient women’s holiday of Rosh Chodesh, the monthly new moon celebration. Now in the final months of saying kaddish for her mother, Agus noted that “Jewish customs of mourning are deeply feminist in that they blend canon with creativity, the psychological with the legal. As such, they are unique among Jewish life cycle events. We’re starting with a very solid core.”

Agus, a Jewish education specialist at New York’s Jewish Child Care Association and on the faculty of Skirball Center for Adult Jewish Learning, spoke of the comfort and catharsis

KEEPING WOMEN BACK

In Jerusalem and other Israeli cities where the men controlling burial follow the “Jerusalem custom” barring women from public mourning, woe betide the woman who arrives at the funeral of a loved one expecting to approach the grave, let alone deliver a eulogy.

Stomping on the biblical tradition of women as the chosen official lamenters, some Israeli rabbis are literally shoving women away from funerals. And these men remain unrepentant when their non-halakhic behavior is challenged. “Satan dances in the cemetery while women attend funerals,” was the comment from the head of the Migdal HaEmek religious council after he blocked the microphone of a woman attempting to deliver a eulogy for her father this past March. The behavior and comments may be primitive, but now the Internet is carrying reports of the outrages worldwide.

In print and online, JOFA, the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, is raising consciousness of this misogynist behavior. In the Summer 2008

JOFA Journal, Blu Greenberg, founder of JOFA, recounts how her cousin traveled 9,000 miles to Jerusalem to bury her mother, whom she had cared for the last months of her life. The chevra kadisha barred her from approaching the grave and she complied, not wanting “to make a fuss.” The more fearless female cousins “walked on without being stopped.”

Orthodox Israeli women are fighting back, but even an Israeli Supreme Court decision may not guarantee change. Back in 2003 in Petah Tikvah, Rivkah Lubitch, who heads the Center for Women’s Justice Haifa office, was barred from giving a eulogy at the funeral of her father, one of Israel’s leading social scientists. She and her mother sued the local chevra kadisha in Israel’s Supreme Court for violating human liberty, freedom of speech and religious freedom. Four years after the funeral, a panel of judges—two Jewish women and one Arab man—decided for the plaintiffs, ordering the Petach Tikvah chevra kadisha to allow women to give eulogies. She said, “No one knows about

these things until it happens to them.”

Even someone as halakhically knowledgeable as Blu Greenberg can be crushed by a seemingly authoritative rabbi. Poignantly, she writes of her gratitude toward the Jerusalem chevra kadisha for their loving care of her son JJ’s body after he was killed in Israel when a van hit his bicycle. But when she touched her son’s shoulder one last time, the chevra kadisha rabbi jumped in saying, “We don’t do that after tahara.” Even in this vulnerable moment, she wondered if the rabbi would have forbidden her husband, a man, from touching their son for a final time. Later, she found there was no halakhic basis for this denial.

When it comes to graveside participation and eulogies in Israel, advice based on experience is “Don’t wait to be invited. Just do it.” Jennifer Stern Breger, JOFA Journal editor, observed that “When you go ahead, they don’t do anything. But if you don’t anticipate problems in advance, you’re in a very vulnerable moment, and you do what people say.”

inherent in some of the traditions: “When you’ve accompanied someone you love to the borders of this world, parting at the dock is excruciating. Tradition allows you to follow them into the ground by positioning you on low stools for the week of shiva. During those seven days your visitors gradually lift you back into the land of the living.”

Agus, following the death of her mother after a decades-long illness, was stunned by a friend’s feelings of guilt after the friend’s mother died in a nursing home. When the woman tried to confess these feelings at shiva, the response was, as Agus put

The innovations Agus and Schulman have created are intimate, emotional and non-institutional. Within the Jewish establishment, many on the front lines dealing with end-of-life issues are women rabbis and social workers working for Jewish agencies, dealing with a part of life where, as Heidi Weiss put it, “Healing isn’t necessarily getting well again.”

Weiss, who coordinates the Pathways to Care program at Westchester Jewish Community Services, sees feminism as part of taking responsibility for your own life and death decisions. This includes signing a health care proxy, which in some—but not

At the traditional shiva minyan, Ruth Schulman, the grieving mother, looked up and said, “This just doesn’t help me at all. What I need is a circle of women.”

it, “Hallmark platitudes” like “Your mother was lucky to have you” and “You did everything you could”—leaving the daughter feeling even more isolated.

Looking again at Rosh Chodesh, Agus created a ritual of expiation for her guilt-ridden friend, centered on the traditional “Yom Kippur Katan,” an abbreviated Day of Atonement once observed before each month’s new moon celebration.

Agus explained, “It came upon me by accident, but turns out to meet a widespread need and, like Rosh Chodesh, Yom Kippur Katan can be marked during any month associated with the deceased, during the 11-month period of mourning or the *yahrzeit*.” She is in the early stages of composing and inviting contributions to the new expiating ritual. These might include: “Forgive me for not visiting often enough.” “Forgive me for devaluing your opinion.” “Forgive me for abusing my power as a healthy person.”

The ritual need not be limited to parental loss or to women, and it’s obviously filling a need. Agus said, “At a recent conference on women and prayer I kept hearing, ‘Oh my God, where do I sign up?’ So, yes. traditional Jewish modes of grieving are uniquely sensitive and profound, but there is a missing piece we are hoping to provide.”

Women coming together in rosh chodesh groups make them a natural successor to the CR—consciousness raising—groups of the early days of the Women’s Movement. The strength of women in a Rosh Chodesh setting has already been adapted in grief. Ruth Schulman of Princeton, N.J., spoke of the devastation she felt following the death of her daughter at 20 from a brain aneurism. When Schulman was sitting at the last shiva minyan, looking at the rows of chairs set up auditorium style, she felt, “This just doesn’t help me at all. What I need is a circle of women.”

She asked her friends if they could get together a circle of 10 or so women for the next Sunday. She remembered telling them, “I don’t know what you’ll do but I need to see a circle of the faces of women that mean so much to me.” That Rosh Chodesh circle is still meeting regularly 22 years later.

all—of the United States is the legal document in which you name a health care agent (a friend, a relative) who will carry out your medical wishes when you can no longer make our own medical decisions. In some states, it is the living will that makes these directives clear.

Weiss finds some women are surprised that they don’t have to name their husbands in their medical proxies. Others have observed that for some women, particularly older widows, this is their first opportunity to feel that they are agents of their own lives.

Weiss also encourages people to write “ethical wills,” putting their values down on paper for the next generation. She sees an ethical will as empowering a person to help shape how she wants to be remembered.

As feminism explores issues of death, women may start becoming more engaged in these areas where most would rather not go. Counterintuitively, as observed by Stephanie Garry, director of community relations at Manhattan’s nonprofit Plaza Jewish Community Chapel, “Women are so pro-active in so many areas, but not in this one.” Perhaps this discrepancy exists because men have been the ones traditionally approached to buy life insurance, to “settle their affairs,” to make sure that they have planned for their loved ones. All this has made death—or at least planning for its financial consequences—more familiar. Or, “perhaps men compartmentalize,” said Garry, whose institution offers programs to help with end-of-life decisions.

Stephanie Dickstein, a rabbi and social worker, works with a network of Jewish healing centers at the Shira Ruskay Center of the Jewish Board of Family and Children’s Services in New York City. Dickstein, 51, describes books about caregiving as a “huge genre by women” and wonders if the encounter with Jewish mourning rituals will be the next subject for women. She’s not surprised that baby boomers don’t have death on their agenda since, she points out, even Moses fought God’s edict of death.

Ellen Rafel, buried in a red caftan after she lost her struggle to lung cancer, was “planning her funeral at the same time she was hoping to get better,” according to Susie Kessler. Kessler explained, “Part of the journey is the delicate balance—I’m going this way

and not that way. Often people have a sense of when the end is near, but there is a stretch of time when there is still hope and the possibility of a miracle.”

Kessler was one of the early staff members of the National Center for Jewish Healing and a moving spirit of the Ma'yan Rosh Chodesh group. She now directs the JCC in Manhattan's Makom: The Center for Mindfulness. She routinely wades into the issue of fear.

As someone who has long been dealing with subjects that most people would rather avoid, Kessler may be pointing the way of bringing to the subject of death a women's consciousness: death as the other side of birth. “People used to be born at home and die at home,” she said. Now with both birth and death handled by professionals, “we are so separated from the process. The result is fear. That's what's left in its place.”

For Kessler, “the entire medical system is based on the premise that death is the ultimate failure.” An alternative is the healing center approach to the seriously ill with spiritual support based on Jewish wisdom. “We are beginning to see creative ritual as part of passing from this world to the next,” Kessler said. “And women are onto this ritual.”

So is death the next feminist issue? “We're the gatekeepers for the entrance to life, housing something transitioning from non-life to life.” Kessler said. “There's no guarantee that a woman can come through the birth process alive. It's a liminal space. No two ways about it. After giving birth you *bench* (pray) *Gomel* (the blessing said after surviving illness, childbirth, danger).” In fact, acknowledging this nexus of life and death, Jewish women would traditionally make their own shrouds during pregnancy.

“It's not that women are less frightened of death than men. We have a lot of ability to be present with creative ritual. We're stepping forward to find more ritual ways to accompany loves ones along that path without fear.”

While the legalistic nitty gritty of end-of-life decisions may be something many of us have known about and ignored, once they're woven into a feminist framework they may become more of a challenge and less of a burden. But the exploration of ritual is what intrigues—discovering whatever happened to the biblical tradition of women as the highly esteemed mourners; elaborating on Esther Broner's vision of a chorus of women tracing the deceased's matrilineage; taking back Jewish funeral rituals from the hands of the professionals and making them our own. ...

Orthodox women clearly have their work cut out for them as they dig into the sources to justify their demands for equal participation in mourning the dead. For most of the rest of us,



ART OPENS THE CONVERSATION

When Susan Dessel was creating an art installation using shrouds, in 2003, she found it impossible to purchase one on the Internet. A kindly employee at the Manhattan non-profit Plaza Jewish Community Chapel came to Dessel's aid, giving her a “beautiful, beautiful linen shroud.” That remnant from the installation “Untitled (The Ultimate Ensemble)” now hangs in her closet.

As an artist, she continues to mine material the public has yet to feel comfortable with. Last summer, her creation of bodies in death-like poses on a swath of sod rolled out at Long Beach Island (N.J.) Foundation of the Arts and Sciences created immediate revulsion. When members threatened to withdraw financial support, Dessel was told, “You can either come back and get the bodies or we can put up a wall.” She went with the wall, and notes the irony of the public not wanting to see the work titled “Our Backyard: A Cautionary Tale.”

Dessel, 63, said, “As baby boomers, whenever we hit another life phase, we talk about it—and death's time has come. Nobody talked about menopause. For our mothers and aunts, it was just grin and bear it. There are still things people don't talk about, especially relating to women. I think art really has an important role in the conversation. It gives people freedom to contemplate things they might not feel comfortable talking about yet.”

Her series of large ceramic “remembrance stones” includes one for her mother, Lenore Hopp Dessel, who died at the age of 49. The shape refers to her mother's broad shoulders and big heart. The red top harks back to her mother's words every time Dessel bought a black dress: “The girl in the red dress has the most fun at the party.” Dessel is currently working on “Still Lives,” about women remembered on their tombstones in old New York only as “wife of” or “daughter of.” The installation honors women in the first Jewish community that settled in Nieuw Amsterdam in 1654 and their female descendants. The show at New York City's Henry Street Settlement runs Oct. 1 through Nov. 7.

educating ourselves in what already exists in Jewish teachings on death and mourning is the next great challenge as we go where few baby boomers have gone before.

Returning to the universal experience of death, reexamining its Jewish rituals with a feminist consciousness, fearlessly rethinking what makes a good funeral may be the bravest new wave of Jewish feminism. ■

Amy Stone is a founding mother of Lilith magazine.

To read more, and to describe particularly satisfying funeral innovations you have developed or experienced, visit Lilith.org.