

New approach to dying: Melaveh Project's 'end-of-life doulas'

BY [LEZAK SHALLAT](#) | MARCH 25, 2019

With a simple ceremony that reflected the solemnity of its mission, the Melaveh Project recently graduated its second group of end-of-life doulas — volunteers trained in giving comfort to dying Jews and their grieving families.

Based in the East Bay, the Melaveh Project is a 3-year-old endeavor aimed at providing free support for the dying within the Jewish community. “Melaveh” is the Hebrew word for “one who accompanies.”

Last month's six graduates felt “a mixture of being somewhat overwhelmed at the task and incredibly grateful and excited to be able to make a difference,” according to Dr. Herbert Brosbe, a retired physician and member of the Melaveh Project steering committee.

“Helping Jewish families embrace their cultural traditions and rituals at the end of life is meaningful and fulfilling,” added Lori Kadish Goldwyn, a new Melaveh volunteer.

The two-day training focused on what it means to be a Jewish presence — and possibly the only presence — at the bedside of someone whose life is near the end.

End-of-life issues have become much more complex in an era in which the baby-boom generation is aging, people are living longer, and families have become both smaller and more geographically dispersed.

“We grow up with a Biblical view that death is scripted, with the dying person in the presence of their loved ones, giving final blessings, taking a deep breath and dying in peace,” said Brosbe. “Unfortunately this is not always the case.”

As a physician, Brosbe interacted with many dying patients and their families.

“Families often need support even more than the dying,” he said. “They get overwhelmed, even traumatized. It doesn't work to simply hand them a brochure.”

Others have no family or friends, or at least none nearby, and face death alone.

That's where the Melaveh Project steps in. Its mission is “to be a presence,” Brosbe said, “to comfort the dying in their final days and hours and provide support for their loved ones.”

That “presence” comes in the form of volunteers with a Jewish perspective trained by the project. The volunteers are called “end-of-life doulas” in a nod to their counterparts at the other end of the life cycle — the birth doula, who helps deliver babies.

The service is available to anyone, from Orthodox to atheist, who self-identifies as Jewish.

“It's not about how you celebrated Hanukkah,” Brosbe said. “There's an emotional connection among Jews that is special, and can bring comfort.”

The project is led by rabbis and members of the East Bay Jewish community, and is not sponsored by any particular congregation.

Volunteers receive training in Jewish traditions, meditations, singing and the appropriate prayers for those who want them. They also learn general counseling skills, although they are not counselors and provide no medical advice or care.

Some have worked previously in grief counseling but now want a more Jewish approach. Others have had some form of participation in a chevra kadisha, the traditional Jewish burial society.

One of the new end-of-life doulas is Patti Goldstein, an interfaith minister in the East Bay who studied to be a hospital chaplain. “What impressed me about the Melaveh Project training is the amount of compassion in the room,” she said. “There was so much caring and experience of being with dying people and family members.”

Goldstein said that “if someone doesn’t want to die alone, I’m hoping I can be there for them.”

Dan Fendel, a member of the Melaveh steering committee, is a retired math professor who was widowed young and has spent 35 years in grief support. He is the founder of the chevra kadisha at Temple Sinai in Oakland and a lead organizer of [an East Bay consortium of Jewish burial societies](#).

“We’re seeing a resurgence of these organizations as a way of reclaiming the mitzvah of these things — and taking them back from the funeral industry,” he said.

The accompaniment process starts with a referral from a member of the clergy, a social worker or family. Volunteers can spend weeks or even months at the client’s bedside, or the call to accompany can come just days or hours in advance.

However, according to Brosbe, three years of meetings with local hospital and hospice staffs have yielded few referrals to date. “We know there’s a need,” he said. “But the community is not yet as familiar with us as we hoped.”

But when Melaveh’s services *are* called upon, the results are apparent.

Said Brosbe: “To have a grieving daughter hug you and say, ‘Thank you for your support. It meant so much to me and my family not to be alone,’ is what makes this work invaluable.”

For information, visit jewish-funerals.org/melaveh, call (510) 649-5724 or email melavehproject@gmail.com.