

Jewish News of Northern California

Death during a pandemic: virtual shiva calls and funerals without mourners

BY DAVID A.M. WILENSKY | MARCH 25, 2020

Under ordinary circumstances, Sophi Jacobs would have traveled from her home in San Francisco to Manhattan for her father's funeral. She would have stayed with her mother for shiva, the seven-day period during which Jewish mourners stay home and receive guests. She would have been surrounded by family and friends and her father's longtime colleagues from New York University, where he was a law professor.

But these are not ordinary circumstances. Her father, James Jacobs, passed away on March 19. Given the pandemic now gripping the world, she felt she could not in good conscience fly to New York.

"It's painful because every piece of me wants to go be with my mother," she said.

"There's no good choice. What if I go there and pick something up on the plane and then expose my 77-year-old mother to it? And maybe I get stuck there because there are travel restrictions, and my children are stuck here without me."

So Jacobs stayed home. She and about 120 friends and family connected to the funeral from afar. Rabbi Angela Buchdahl of Manhattan's Central Synagogue, a longtime family friend, officiated via Zoom.

"It looked like she was in Central Synagogue, but it was just a virtual backdrop," Jacobs said.

Now she's sitting shiva. But what is shiva when most people are not leaving their homes anyway? Like so many things now, it's virtual. Jacob's friend Fraidy Aber has organized a series of Zoom gatherings for her, bringing new meaning to the term "shiva call."

"She's a close friend, and I was hoping to surround her with that feeling of being surrounded by love and being around people who want to give you love and honor her father," Aber said. "It felt like the only way was to try it virtually."

In some ways, Aber said, the Zoom shiva calls feel even more personal than in-person shiva gatherings. "In a shiva house there's a lot of food and side conversations," she said. "But because we were focused on this same Zoom call, it was more intimate. Everyone is in the same conversation. It was very collective."

Jacobs feels the same way. “It’s oddly intimate,” she said. “Only one person can speak at a time, really. I thought it would be more awkward than it has been. I wish I’d been there at the funeral to hold everybody, but despite the distance it has been an intimate experience.”



Sophi Jacobs with her daughter and father, James.

Everything about mourning and caring for the dead has changed, says Sam Salkin, executive director of San Francisco’s Sinai Memorial Chapel, which is involved with Jewish funerals and burials all over the Bay Area.

“We are only doing graveside services,” he said. That means no services at Sinai’s chapels, at cemetery chapels or at synagogues.

Those graveside services are proceeding with some unusual modifications. There can be no more than 10 mourners, who must all stand 6 feet apart, and there are no chairs. Jewish mourners traditionally take turns putting a shovel-full of earth on the coffin once it is lowered into the grave — but that shovel is just one more object to sanitize, so mourners now have to take soil and toss it onto the coffin with their bare hands.

“We have two priorities with any family: *kavod hameit*, dignity for the deceased, and kindness for the mourners and survivors,” Salkin said. “But our highest priority right now is making sure our staff and cemetery workers are healthy and as separated from the public as possible. Because if they get sick, we can’t serve the public.”

Bodies are handled differently before the funeral as well. *Taharah*, the traditional process of preparing a body for burial, ordinarily involves washing the body by hand. “We are placing the shroud on the body and we are doing all the liturgy, but no washing,” said Salkin.

He is concerned about the people who prepare the bodies as well, volunteer members of the *chevra kadisha*, the Jewish burial society. “The majority of people who do that work are over 65, so it’s prudent to limit having them in the buildings,” Salkin said.

On top of all of all of those practical considerations, Salkin says that dealing with mourning families is different now, too. Rather than meeting in person, he’s working from home and meeting with them by phone.

“It’s harder for the family and it’s harder for us, but the families understand,” Salkin said. “I think they’re grateful that we’ve left no stone unturned. It’s not how they would have imagined or liked it to be, but they’re respectful.”

Sinai has a policy of always doing burials of indigent Jews pro bono, so they’re used to dealing with financial hardship in making funeral arrangements. They haven’t yet had to do any burials for families that have had a loss of job or business due to coronavirus restrictions, but they anticipate that will happen eventually.

“We’re prepared,” Salkin said. “We’ll be able to work with families given their particular situation.”

He said they’re also preparing for the possibility of families losing more than one person in close succession as the pandemic worsens.

“Under normal circumstances, it’s our job to think of everything so people can deal with their loss and don’t have to worry about the details,” Salkin said. “And in this time in particular, we really do have to think of everything.”

As for Jacobs, she is dealing with her loss as best she can, and taking solace in the fact that her father would be amused by his unusual funeral. “He was not the most technologically adept,” she recalled. “But he had such a wonder at every new thing. ‘Oh, that’s fabulous!’ he’d say. ‘Unbelievable!’”

With a laugh, she added, “My dad would be so tickled that he was at the forefront of funeral technology.”