No time to mourn
Grief during coronavirus
By Belinda Luscombe

In the weeks since his father died, Bernard Jacob Solomon hasn’t been able to hug his mother. Nobody in his very large extended family has been able to drop by her New Jersey home with food or to sit and listen and cry. His mom has the same coronavirus that killed her husband, and cannot accept visitors.

Grief is a lonely and confusing experience, even in less troubled times. Humans rely on rituals and traditions that anchor them to the past and the future, that draw them close to the people they have, while not diminishing the love for those they have lost. People sit shiva. They gather at a mass, a wake; they do not go through it alone. But in the current season, death has been turned inside out; the bodies are crowding together at makeshift morgues, and the bereaved are left isolated in a tomb of loss.

Stephen Solomon, 72, died on March 24, but because of all the protocols surrounding the coronavirus, he wasn’t buried for almost a week. It was hardly a comforting experience. “We couldn’t dress my father in a suit,” says Jacob, as his friends know him, 39. “He was buried in a pouch in a coffin. I wasn’t allowed to see him. So he went into the ambulance on Friday morning, and we never saw him again. It feels like he got abducted by aliens.” Jacob and his four fellow mourners (his husband, his mother’s sister and her husband and child) had to bring shovels to put earth on the grave. Afterward, Jacob went back to his apartment, made a turkey sandwich and ate it alone.

These small affections are in no way comparable to the loss of human life. COVID-19 has wreaked, but they compound each community’s sense of loneliness and depletion. And as the deaths pile up, so do the displaced and disoriented mourners. Jacob’s sister is with his mom, for which he’s grateful. But they’ve lived in a cocoon since Stephen died. “What this virus has taken away is the most valuable thing we have, that we can support each other,” Jacob says. “The hug and the touch. Thousands of years of traditions for dealing with death, they’re taken away.”

He fights the thought daily that his father didn’t deserve this. Stephen Solomon was a ball of energy. He grew up poor, sold newspapers from the age of 5, was in the Coast Guard Reserve, had two master’s degrees. In a cruel irony, he contracted the virus, his family thinks, at a class on how to defend his local synagogue from an attack.

Jacob’s only solace is that he is taking care of things in the way his father would have wanted. And he’s looking forward to finally embracing his mother, although it will make his father’s death more real. “I just can’t imagine,” he says, “how painful that hug is going to be.”

Solomon, second from right, with, from left, son-in-law Duncan Hines, children Jenny and Jacob, niece Rachel Berzon and wife Sidney in 2006