

# THE JEWISH JOURNAL

## Senior Moments

### **There's No Time Like the Present**

By Ellie Kahn

In my family, death and funerals seem to inspire joking. Maybe it's discomfort, but it also seems to be a lack of concern and heaviness about the whole thing. No one in my family does much visiting of graves, and burials are apparently not deemed necessary.

My mother wants her body cremated and her ashes scattered at her camp in Maine. I imagine my sister and I will someday combine sharing our grief with a nice trip to New England.

My father, after years of making jokes about his postmortem plans, suddenly informed us that he wants to donate his body to the Northeastern Medical College in Ohio. (His only concern is that some of his former students might recognize him.)

My grandparents also gave their bodies to medicine. My father recalled how some men from the medical school carried my grandmother out in a body bag. Did it bother him? "Well, they looked just like the men who came to fix the television," he joked.

But it is a serious subject, and a necessary one to discuss well before the time comes, in order to avoid additional emotional stress and expense.

However, only 35 percent of the funerals in the Los Angeles area are preplanned through mortuary arrangements, says Steve Espolt, director of sales at Hillside Memorial Park and Mortuary in Los Angeles. This means that someone — a spouse or a child perhaps — not only has lost a loved one, but also has to make arrangements for the person's body while grieving.

Planning a funeral is not unlike planning a wedding, Espolt says. For both events, you need clergy, a location, flowers and probably some meaningful comments. But "a wedding is usually planned over six months to a year and is the happiest day of your life. A funeral has to be planned in 24 hours and might be the worst day of your life," he says.

"We don't ask to be born, and we have nothing to say about when it's our time to be called," says Ira J. Polisky, sales manager at Eden Memorial Park in Mission Hills. Making arrangements and having them paid for ahead of time, Polisky asserts, "is the greatest expression of love within a family." Eden offers seminars at temples and fraternal groups for the purpose of bringing the facts of life about funeral arrangements out in the open.

"After 20 years in this business, I've seen prepared and I've seen unprepared," Espolt says. "Prepared is better."

Both Polisky and Espolt mentioned payment plans they offer to encourage families to be prepared. "A small deposit is made," says Polisky of Eden's plan, "and then the necessary items are paid off over a seven-year period, which locks in the prices." This way, one isn't forcing a new widow to start writing checks at the painful time of loss.

If it's practical and relatively easy to make arrangements, why are so few people prepared?

"Most people don't like to think about their own mortality, so they don't like to talk about what will happen to them after they die," says Arnold Saltzman, general manager of Mount Sinai Memorial Parks and Mortuary.

"Many people take the ostrich approach," Polisky says. "They pretend that nothing will happen to them, that they will have as much time as they want."

According to Espolt, men are worse than women, because more men don't want to admit they're going to die. Now they are having to deal with their parents' arrangements, and they don't like that either. So, they avoid the subject.

Saltzman, a former therapist and executive vice president of the Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles, a beneficiary agency of The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles, has seen stress explode when funeral arrangements are not made ahead of time. "Families come in with old wounds and battles that they've had over the years," Saltzman says. "The stress causes them to become more agitated, rather than bringing them together, and as they're trying to reach these decisions they haven't made already, they get into arguments."

One result is "emotional overspending." Espolt describes a situation where a recently widowed man asked the son of his deceased wife to choose whatever he wanted for his mother, since she hadn't made her wishes known. "The son picked the most expensive casket available, which made the widower uncomfortable, partly because he knew his wife wouldn't have wanted anything so extravagant, but he'd made the offer and felt he had to live with it."

Parents frequently make a decision to just let their kids take care of funeral arrangements when the time comes. "This places an undue burden on children," Saltzman says. "If the parents won't talk about it, their children should try to initiate discussion. It will make things easier when the time comes."

To encourage discussion, Saltzman has created a brochure called "The Right Words," which offers advice on how to broach this awkward subject. Mount Sinai has also launched a campaign that includes pins that say, "Let's Talk."

Espolt says Hillside is also keeping its services in the front of people's minds with a recent community service ad offering 20-year yahrtzeit memorial calendars to anyone who calls and asks for one.

After speaking with these professionals, I feel relieved that I know what my parents want for themselves after they die. It will be difficult enough to be feeling their loss without trying to imagine what they would have wanted.

Hopefully, it'll be many years before I need to think about it again.

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