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# *COVID-19 and Funeral-by-Zoom*

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## Introduction

Restrictions, lockdowns, self-isolations and quarantines enforced by various countries across the globe in order to prevent the spreading of COVID-19 have had a serious impact on many aspects of everyday life. More than ever people have realised the importance of human relations and solidarity, understanding and co-operation. Even the word love, however cautious we are to use it in a scientific article, has been often mentioned during these challenging times. Suddenly, although many new children were born, they could not be physically welcomed and cuddled by their closest relatives; university graduates could not enjoy the moment of their graduation with their parents and grandparents; adult children could not physically meet their elderly parents and celebrate their birthdays; friends, partners and couples were stuck in isolation in different locations; and many, many people could not participate in funerals of their — even closest — relatives and friends, which was one of the most painful and stressful experiences.

Numerous ceremonies and rituals with hundreds of years of uninterrupted tradition across the world had to be cancelled, postponed or changed as a consequence of the COVID-19 restrictions. These restrictions have differed in different countries, depending on their governmental decisions. Due to these decisions, we could see diverse responses to how people dealt with practising important rituals, primarily those associated with the life cycle — *rites de passage* (Van Gennep [1909] 1960).

In this short contribution, I focus on death and funeral rituals during the COVID-19 pandemic between March and June 2020. The pandemic has seriously challenged the question of death. Most countries that were hit by the pandemic introduced rules that prohibited relatives from visiting their loved ones in hospitals or in senior-care homes, and from seeing them after they died. Priests and other faith leaders could not pray and perform last rites at a dying person's bedside. Only a restricted number of people (or none) could attend the funeral. Most humans are afraid of dying alone, but during the pandemic many did die alone. And, although grieving practices are crucial for one's mental and spiritual health, many who lost their loved ones had to grieve alone, without a chance to show respect for the deceased in a traditional way.

People of various faiths had to find compromises and ways to replace traditional funeral rituals with new practices that were crucial in the process of burial and mourning in their religion. The present discussion is based on my observations from participating in a Jewish funeral by zoom. This brief ethnography has been inspired by a new, but very emotional experience.

## Very Brief Theoretical Remarks

The rituals of death and funerals are as old as humankind. Although they vary across religions, cultures, ethnic groups and geographic regions, they also show some universal features: all

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cultures and religions care for the deceased and show respect to them through a number of ritual practices. These practices cover the period before death, death itself, the after death, the funeral and the first burial (Pardo 1989: 117).

Excellent ethnographic works of the founding fathers of anthropology of death (Bronislaw Malinowski 1954, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown 2017, Robert Hertz 2017, Arnold van Gennep 1960 and Clifford Geertz 1974, to name just a few), who made significant contributions to the understanding of 'mortuary rituals, the emotions of grief and mouring, and the complexities of death and the afterworld' have been rethought and reconceptualised in the recent decades (Robben 2018: xv). The new anthropology of death does not look at the notion of death as a distinct biological and sociocultural phenomenon, but studies it together with life because 'the boundaries between them are considered to be porous, and liminality is understood more as a bridge between life and death than as a demarcated time frame' (Robben 2018: xviii). According to Pardo, 'there is a strong continuous interaction between tangible aspects of existence and symbolic, moral and spiritual ones and, most important, between body and soul and between the world of the living and that of the dead' (Pardo 1996: 11). In Pardo's research in Naples, Italy, the notion of 'a good death' emerged as a death that occurs when close relatives surround and care for the dying person, who does not refuse to acknowledge the coming death. A good death is a death accepted by both the dying and their relatives. It depends on such acceptance which then rests upon a fulfilled life and a quiet dying (Pardo 1989: 107).

Death is universally understood as a rite of passage, a transition to the other world (Pardo 1989), a journey to an ultimate destination or to the ancestral world (Saifur 2020). This transition that concerns both the body and the soul is effected through complex mortuary practices (Pardo 1996: 103); the deceased must be prepared by ritual washing, shaving and dressing. Rules vary with each religion and religious community and are taken very seriously. As Robert Hertz wrote: 'The body of the deceased is not regarded like the carcass of some animal: specific care must be given to it and a correct burial; not merely for reasons of hygiene, but out of moral obligation' ([1905–1906] 2017: 19). Any disruption in these long-term traditions can have serious consequences on the mental health of the community and of the relatives of the deceased.

In human history, only at time of war, genocide and pandemics death and funeral rituals have been seriously disrupted. The COVID-19 pandemic has been the first global challenge of this kind since World War 2. It has caused a large number of 'bad deaths', as dying people cound not be looked after by their relatives in the last hours of their life and passed away alone.

**A Jewish Funeral-by-zoom**

The focus of this ethnographic case study is a Jewish online funeral that took place in London, UK, in May 2020 during the pandemic. I had the privilege to participate in the funeral of my friend's mother and in the following evening ceremony — the beginning of Shiva; that is, the week-long mouring period for the relatives. In order to explain the extraordinarity of an online ceremony of such importance, I will first outline the key points of a Jewish funeral.

A Jewish funeral — like funerals in other old religions — has its own rituals with a tradition of hundreds of years. Its main part is a burial that should take place within 24 hours after death, or as soon as possible (similar to Islam). However, because of a broad variety of Jewish religious movements (such as the ultra-Orthodox, Orthodox, Conservative, Reform or Reconstructionist), the details of practice vary according to each Jewish community and its denomination.

In all Jewish communities the preparation of the body for the funeral is the responsibility of a burial society, the chevra kadisha. Members of the society are volunteers who take care of all major steps in order to keep tradition and rules (washing, ritual purification and dressing in a cloth shroud) and show respect to the deceased. The funeral service usually takes place at the cemetery. After the service, the mourners move to the grave and symbolically fill it (usually using a shovel), which is considered a good mitzvah, an act of human kindness and a religious duty.

In my case-study, due to the fact that the deceased, the beloved mother of my friend, was an elderly lady and a victim of the coronavirus, only the funeral service people could be physically present at the funeral. The closest relatives had to find a compromise between the religious rules and governmental COVID-19 rules, which were introduced for entirely good reasons. Still, the decision was not easy for them.

The whole funeral service was then organised via the zoom application. As the son of the deceased said:

> '[...] then it is about how you manage what's left [...] what agency you have. Doing the funeral in that way allowed us, as you saw, to do and say things and hear from others in a way which was meaningful for us and for the other mourners. And we think mum would have approved. It also meant that there was no question about us being able to be with Dad to try to support him'.

The closest family, the Reform female Rabbi and relatives and friends took part in the funeral virtually. The funeral prayer-book was offered to all participants online and put on screen during the service. This was the second online experience of this type within a week for the Rabbi leading the service. In spite of its unusual form, the ceremony was very emotional and decent. The online participation in the funeral was about three-times higher than the closest family expected. Friends and relatives from all over the world who would otherwise be unable to attend due to various reasons (illness, distance, finances, and so on) took part in the ceremony and had a place 'in the first row' (thanks to zoom). The funeral-by-zoom offered an opportunity to present visually the life of the deceased with all her important achievements and milestones also to distant relatives or friends who did not know her very well. The ceremony was a celebration of her life, which many people could share and enjoy. I am not sure whether the real ceremony would have achieved as much as the online one — at least not in the same way.

Several hours later, the e-Shiva started. The Shiva is a mourning period of seven days that follows the burial. The closest relatives (parents, spouses, children and siblings) are supposed to follow certain requirements during this period (they stay at home, pray, wear torn clothes as an expression of grief and follow several other rules). The first evening of the Shiva takes place after the funeral; it is usually when all relatives and friends visit the home of a mourner (the Shiva house). This is an opportunity to express grief for loss and sorrow, and share memories. During this evening, Kaddish — a hymn of the magnification and sanctification of God's name — is recited.

The e-Shiva-by-zoom I participated in started on the evening after the funeral. The son of the deceased welcomed several participants from all over the world. Then, the Rabbi took over and recited the Kaddish together with all relatives and friends (the texts online made it possible for everyone to follow). The usual Shiva customs (washing hands, litting candles, covering mirrors, serving meals of condolences traditionally offered by neighbours or friends) took place within each family that participated in the e-Shiva. After the official part of the ceremony, most participants did not leave and wanted to share their memories of the deceased. Everyone wanted to say something nice and personal. In spite of Shiva ceremony being a virtual zoom meeting, the experience was very personal, emotional, even intimate — perhaps because one could see closely the faces and homes of all participants. Every contribution to the online exchange ended with a usual Jewish wish: 'We wish you a long life'. It was an unforgettable experience and, despite the virtual form of the funeral and the Shiva, the whole ceremony was decent and very respectful to the deceased.

**Final Remarks**

In this short case study based on my personal experience I have tried to demonstrate how a traditional Jewish funeral in a Reform Jewish community in the UK had to accomodate to governmental restrictions.[1] Of course, face-to-face human contact can be hardly replaced. However, we live in times of globalisation when many extended families live all over the world, and in case of the death of a relative not all family members can manage to participate in the funeral within 24 hours (in the case of Jewish and Muslim families). The pandemic experience of funerals-by-zoom has demonstrated that the future of funerals might include zooming, streaming or other online forms for those who cannot participate physically but still want to be involved.

In the whole history of mankind, rituals, rites de passage, customs and ceremonies have been crucial in people's lives. They present the certainty of our existence. Whatever happens, rituals, customs and ceremonies will remain — their form may change, but they will always be here in order to protect continuity, solidarity, collaboration, understanding and love. Let us hope that the corona-crisis will teach us this important lesson and help strengthen humanity across the globe.

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