

No Ice Cream at My Funeral

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I was in eleventh grade when my classmate lost her mother to cancer. We had been praying for her mother's recovery for months, and we knew that the situation was getting worse, but somehow we never expected her to die. When you're sixteen years old, death seems very far away. But one day, the phone call came. She had passed away in the middle of the night. The funeral was to be held at 6 pm that very evening.



I had never been to a funeral before, and the prospect of being in such close proximity to a corpse frightened me. With trepidation, I made my way to the funeral home. The night was dark and dank, and I shivered from the cold.

The funeral was every bit as painful as I feared it would be. My classmate, an only daughter who had been very close to her mother, was utterly devastated. The woman's many students were crushed, friends and relatives wailed. Her husband gave a eulogy, speaking of his wife's devotion to her family, describing her incredible attributes, attesting to the fact that in two decades of marriage he had never heard her raise her voice. I left deeply pained – and deeply inspired. This is what a woman can do with forty years of life, I remember thinking. And I went home and hugged my own mother very tightly.

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I'm idly scanning the New York Times headlines when one pops out at me. "It's My Funeral and I'll Serve Ice Cream if I Want To," it screams. Intrigued, I click, and start reading. John Leland is exploring new trends in funerals.

"As members of the baby boomer generation plan final service for their parents or themselves," he wrote, "they bring new consumer expectation and fewer attachments to churches, traditions or organ music – forcing funeral directors to be more like party planners and inviting some party planners to test the farewell waters,"

And the line between funeral and party is getting increasingly blurry. Robert Tisch, who ran the Loews Corporation, had a marching band at his memorial service, while Estee Lauder arranged for waiters to pass out chocolate covered marshmallows on silver platters at hers.

One family held their father's funeral on the 18th green of his favorite golf course, "because that's where dad was instead of church on Sunday morning, so why are we going to church? Line up his buddies and hit balls." Harry Ewell, who had worked as an ice cream vendor for many years arranged to have his ice cream truck lead his funeral procession, and had popsicles handed out at the end of the ceremony.

Others hold funerals in restaurants, bars, or country clubs. A client of Lynn Isenberg's Lights Out service requested a funeral that would include a wild disco party atop her favorite mountain so her friends could remember the happy times they shared.

Cremation makes all this easier. "The body's a downer, especially to boomers" says Mark Duffey, who runs the first nationwide funeral concierge service. "If the body doesn't have to be there, it frees us up to do what we want." So the body is reduced to a small pile of ashes and everyone can enjoy the party.

The Jewish approach to death and funerals could not be more different. One of the core beliefs of Judaism is that this world is merely a hallway leading us to the banquet hall – the World to Come. If this life is all there is, then it's not illogical to want a funeral which will provide one last fling. But Jews know that we come to this world with a mission to

fulfill, one that is entirely unrelated to the number of good times we manage to pack in.

The tragedy of death is the fact that it signals the end to our potential for growth. The Vilna Gaon, a towering sage who lived in the eighteenth century, was reported to have held his tzitzit and cried as he lay on his deathbed.

“How difficult it is to part from this world, the world of deeds,” he lamented. “Here, for a few pennies you can obtain the great mitzvah of tzitzit. In the World to Come there will be no more chances to do mitzvos.”

A Jewish funeral is a reflection of the tragedy of being able to do no more, as well as the realization that the person is passing onto a better place. A dead person is treated with extreme reverence. Burial is done as quickly as possible, and the body, dressed in pure white shrouds, is placed in the earth. While the soul rises to meet its Creator, the body is returned to the earth from which it was formed.

There are prayers and psalms to say at a funeral which underscore our acceptance of G-d's righteousness even as we are overwhelmed with grief. Eulogies are given, describing the greatness of the person just lost, and exhorting those left behind to learn the lessons the deceased's life embodied. The focus is not on the deceased's hobby, profession, or favorite pastime, but on his essence.

As the funeral of my classmate's mother showed me, a Jewish funeral can be an uplifting experience. It is not only a tribute to the dead; it's also a wake-up call for the living. It reminds us where we will all ultimately end up, and causes us to wonder- what do I want said at my funeral? How do I have to live in order to merit a eulogy like that? A funeral teaches us that no one lives forever, and we never know how much longer we have with our parents, spouse, and children. It propels us to reprioritize our life before it's too late.

But it's nearly impossible for any of that to happen if the funeral is taking place on a golf course, with the participants primarily focused on making a double eagle, or if it is run to the tunes of disco music. Having a funeral that blocks out, rather than highlights, the truths about life and death, is a disgrace for the dead, and a lost opportunity for the living. And that's why there will be no ice cream at my funeral.

Bassi Gruen is a licensed social worker, a professional writer, and the Editorial Director of [Targum Press](#). She's published hundreds of articles in numerous Jewish publications. Bassi is the author of [A Mother's Musings](#), a collection of articles taking an honest look at the challenges and joys of motherhood. She lives with her husband, her children, and her dreams in Beitar Illit.

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