

Jewish Wisdom for
LIVING
— and —
DYING

A Spiritual Journey
Through the Prayers and
Rituals of *Maavor Yabok*
and *Sefer Hallayim*



STEVEN MOSS

foreword by Simcha Paull Raphael

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Foreword

According to Rabbi Moses Isserles “One who visited a sick person and did not offer a prayer on their behalf, has not fulfilled the mitzvah of bikkur cholim, visiting the sick.” (Yoreh Deah, 335, 4)

I recall being sixteen years old and walking into the hospital room to visit my grandfather after he had a heart attack. Nothing in my life had prepared me for what I encountered—a complex array of medical technology, tubes, wires, and flashing lights all connected to my beloved grandfather, seemingly keeping him alive. I was traumatized by that experience, and in reflecting upon it over fifty years later, I felt totally helpless to do anything to offer my Zaydi any kind of caring, compassion or support. I smiled at him through the mask of medical machinery covering his face and probably slipped out of the room as quickly as possible in total discomfort.

I don't remember anyone else being in the room at the time, and I certainly have no recollections of any healing prayers; and there was nothing particularly Jewish about that encounter. Yet my grandfather was quintessentially an “old world Jew”, a simple man who worked his entire adult life in a garment factory in the city of Montreal. Born in Eastern Europe, he emigrated to Canada as a young man, and though Yiddish was his first language, prided himself on speaking English without an accent. Throughout his life the rubrics of Judaism were central to who he was, to what he did. No one would have ever described him as an assimilated Jew. He and my grandmother had a kosher home, observed and all the Jewish holy days, even if not traditional or Orthodox in practice. Nonetheless, we celebrated Passover Seders in my grandparents' home, on Yom Kippur my grandfather always fasted, and since he had sung in a High Holy Day choir in his younger years, would tell the tale of his frequent long treks across the city to arrive at synagogue punctually for Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur services.

And yet, in that time of crisis and sickness after his heart attack, what were the Jewish resources present for him as he lay in a hospital bed close to death? As far as I could tell, there was very little Jewish spiritual support available for him, nor for other members of our family. In that era rabbis were not being trained in pastoral care; there were no books available in English on Jewish care for the sick and dying; and our family knew nothing about a *bikkur cholim* society for visiting the sick. Most likely the only chaplain affiliated with the hospital was a Catholic priest who performed last rites for dying Catholic patients. And Jewish rituals and prayers for the sick and dying? Certainly not.

My grandfather and I were not the only ones without a spiritual and functional framework to meet the needs of the moment when faced with sickness and death. This dearth of efficacious Jewish deathbed traditions impacted an entire generation of Jews.

There is another story along these lines told about an eighty-five year old Jewish woman, dying in Brooklyn Convalescent Hospital. Her daughter, a well-intentioned baby-boomer, wanted to go read her mother passages from *Bardo Thodol*, the Tibetan Book of Dead. This sixteenth-century Buddhist deathbed manual composed in the monasteries of ancient Tibet depicts visions of dancing *Dakini* goddesses and flaming wrathful Heruka Buddhas one encounters upon leaving the body. Stephen Levine, an early pioneer doing spiritual work with the dying, warned the woman that reading that text would likely scare and confuse her poor mother. “Go read her old Yiddish love poetry,” he advised. But again, where were the available Jewish resources? There are books of the dead all around the world. We have heard of the Tibetan Book of Dead, the Egyptian Book of the Dead, certainly Christianity has deathbed rituals and prayers coming out the medieval tradition of *Ars Moriendi*, the art of dying. And more recently we have been introduced to books of the dead, or prayer traditions for accompanying the dying from various indigenous cultures. And the Jewish Book of the Dead?

It turns out, as Steven Moss articulates in *Jewish Wisdom for Living and Dying: Spiritual Journey through Prayers and Rituals of Maavor Yabok and Sefer Hahayyim*, Judaism does have a very extensive legacy of teachings and sacred texts on dealing with sickness, dying, death and the afterlife. Dating back to the postTalmudic tractate *Semahot*, on practices of death and mourning, and continuing through the medieval era and into modernity, Judaism produced scores of texts on death, dying and post-mortem survival, most of which have been totally lost to our contemporary Jewish world. Over the course of the 20th century—especially after World War II and the Holocaust—scientific rationalism, secularization of religion and a cultural discomfort talking about death stripped away interest in anything having to do with prayer traditions for the sick and dying. Furthermore, as a result of migrations of Jews from the traditional Jewish cultures of Eastern Europe and Mediterranean lands to North America, Jewish wisdom on sickness, death, and dying slipped out of view, vanquished into the dustbin of history, or, at best, into arcane libraries of academic Jewish learning.

As he tells the story, as a young rabbinical student and a novice chaplain, Steven Moss heard the call to explore the text that can most closely be understood to be a Jewish Book of the Dead, *Maavor Yabok*, the central manual of the Jewish burial societies of Southern, Central and Eastern Europe for centuries. That sacred text, as well as *Sefer Hahayyim*, a collection of prayers for the sick and dying from late 18th century Amsterdam, literally called out to our author to bring their contents out of the library stacks into the hands of those caring for the sick and dying today.

Over forty years ago, I had the opportunity to read Rabbi Moss's Rabbinic thesis. At the time, as I was beginning my own work studying Jewish views of the afterlife, I felt that book needed to be published one day. As life teaches us all, everything happens in its own time, its own rhythm. As we have seen, COVID-19 has catalyzed a shifting of priorities bringing health care and illness more sharply into focus. In ways we might not have predicted, the time has arrived.

In this pandemic era of death and loss caused by a stealth virus, circumstances are now ripe for Steven Moss's extensive research and scholarly writings to see the light of day. Four decades later we finally get to read the act of literary archeology he has accomplished. In translating, interpreting and delineating the prayer traditions of *Maavor Yabok* and *Sefer Hahayyim*, this book brings the legacy of Jewish deathbed traditions into the 21st century. Through this unique book we are invited to explore a wide assortment and literary pastiche of Jewish prayers and rituals for the end-of-life journey. And while these prayers are not written in the metaphors and language of contemporary life, the passion and profundity of these age-old prayers invite us to imagine being present with others who are dealing with life-threatening illness, or preparing to leave this world behind. *Jewish Wisdom for Living and Dying: Spiritual Journey through Prayers and Rituals of Maavor Yabok and Sefer HaHayyim* invites each of us to think deeply about the efficacy of prayers for the sick and dying in our own times, and what prayers for healing mean to each of us individually.

It is more than fifty years since the pioneering work of the Swiss psychiatrist Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross spawned a cultural transformation of attitudes towards dying and death. Today, we are engaged in bringing back to life long-lost Jewish traditions on dying, death and afterlife. At the same time, we are witnessing the emergence and proliferation of important and sophisticated revolutionary trends in care for the dying and bereaved. The continual spread of the hospice movement; training of a growing cadre of death doulas; international expansion of legalized medical aid in dying; future use of psychedelics with terminal patients; growth of green burial and home funeral practices; resurgence of Chevra Kaddisha practices in both traditional and liberal Jewish communities; the Death Café movement; and so many other innovations are all part of the burgeoning of expanded and transformed attitudes and practices of dying and death. Clearly a widespread revolution in death care is happening in our times.

Against this background, *Jewish Wisdom for Living and Dying: Spiritual Journey through Prayers and Rituals of Maavor Yabok and Sefer HaHayyim* is a wonderful contribution to the emerging Jewish

literature on death and dying. Undoubtedly, this is a book that can be read cover to cover. At the same time, this is book to be studied like a *sefer*, a traditional sacred Hebrew text that can be savored and returned to over and over. Each page, each painstaking translation can be studied for its depth and wisdom as a doorway into the mysterious and complex world of the end-of-life journey. This book is a gift from the past to the evolving future of death care. We are grateful to Steven Moss for his persistent and courageous work bringing the legacy of this lost wisdom to our attention.

Stephen Levine, *Who Dies? An Investigation of Conscious Living and Conscious Dying* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1982), p. 272

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