

JEWISH WAYS OF DEATH AND MOURNING



taught by

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Sundays, 11 am

January 10, 17, 24

Want to learn more about Jewish approaches to death, burial and mourning? Wonder about your choices and options? This class will explore you both traditional and modern approaches to this important issue. The epidemic reminds us of our mortality, so use this opportunity to reflect more deeply on your choices.



Dec 23, 2020
9 Tevet 5781 ט"ב

Hello Temple Sinai,

My father loved Christmas. He would take us for long drives to look at the lights, randomly blurting out “ho, ho, ho!”. Many years a lit tree twinkled in our living room window. For him Christmas was an American holiday, and he loved being American.

My mother got in on it, too, play Christmas songs on the piano and going to workshops on decorating, or cooking, or how to make Christmas decorations yourself. I distinctly remember the breast bones of a turkey bleached, shellacked and turned into a sled pulled by reindeer made of Styrofoam balls. My brother and I threw it out while my mother wasn't looking when we moved to a new house. “I wonder where that sled is?” she would say for years.

My father wanted, more than anything, to be seen and accepted as a regular American, but with his dark “Jewfro”, dark skin and wide nose, he tried a bit too hard to fit in. He was that father at the little league game yelling louder and clapping louder than anyone else to show just how much he loved baseball. He had never actually played baseball, and I absolutely hated it, and the whole thing seems to have started with Sandy Koufax, but there we were for years in that absurd theater of Americanism. My father put the flag out ceremonially on national holidays. We pledged allegiance. His enthusiasm for Christmas came from that same impulse, to be American and to be seen as a regular American, and yes, to him that meant *white* male American. Later, my parents would move to the Louisiana Gulf Coast where he felt less conspicuous in his skin, but still didn't fit in since he wasn't actually Cajun. He was a Jewish engineer, as were both his brothers.

I myself have very happy memories of Christmas growing up: car rides to visit relatives, big Southern meals, being asked to sing in the local churches Christmas cantata, singing with the choir at the College of William and Mary in Colonial Williamsburg as they lit a yule log, going to visit good friends for Christmas over winter break at college.

I also have more difficult memories of the holidays: being picked on and bullied about being Jewish, my parents fighting about complicated family dynamics, and having to figure out what to say, over and over, when asked what I was doing for Christmas. Worst of all, I will never be able to forget living in Manhattan near 14th Street and having endless badly arranged Christmas songs

blaring from horrible loudspeakers from every store for over a month, which made walking our Lhasa Apso a daily purgatory.

I think for many of in our community, Christmas time can be a complicated time to navigate, particularly in mixed families with younger children, and particularly for those who convert to Judaism from Christianity. Each of us finds our own way to navigate it, but this time of year can bring push our buttons, and with the lack of sun, and this year social isolation, I know many of you might be having a tough time.

For those who are struggling at this time this year, just know there are many in this community who are having similar experiences. If you are struggling, just let us know and we are here to listen and offer you connection and support.

While I want to be respectful of and sensitive to Christianity, and the religious aspects of this Christian holy day, I also can see that Christmas is also American secular holiday, like Halloween, or Thanksgiving. The Southern Jewish community I grew up in mostly had trees, decorations, and a big dinner on Christmas. Only when I came north to you Yankees did I discover the joy of Chinese food. Trees with lights is not a particularly Christian custom, and neither is gift wrapping, or a flying sleigh.

And it turns out that many of America's favorite Christmas songs were written by Jews. Here are just some of the songs for which the words and music were written by Jews:

- **"The Christmas Song"** (*Chestnuts roasting on an open fire...*) by Mel Tormé
- **"Let it Snow"** by Sammy Cahn and Jule Styne
- **"Santa Baby"** by Joan Javits and Phil Springer
- **"It's The Most Wonderful Time of the Year"** by George Wyle and Eddie Pola (born Bernard Weissman and Sidney Edward Pollacsek).
- **"Silver Bells"** by Ray Evans and Jay Livingston (born Jacob Harold Levison)
- **"White Christmas"** by Irving Berlin (born Israel Baline)
- **"Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree," "A Holly, Jolly Christmas," and "Silver and Gold"** by Johnny Marks ("Rudolph," which was co-written with Robert Louis May (also Jewish) and represents the ostracism May felt growing up as a Jew being teased about his nose.
- **"Walkin' In a Winter Wonderland"** by Felix Bernard and Richard B. Smith (Smith, the lyricist, was not Jewish).

Given all those songs, it seems that Jews are part of American Christmas, whether it is part of our winter holiday celebrations or not.

KABBALAT SHABBAT FRIDAY NIGHT at 6:30

We are having services this Shabbat so if you aren't celebrating the 'other holiday' try to come. We will even put a couple of songs to those Christmas tunes by Jewish composers. I know my father would smile and sing along, totally off key since he was tone-deaf.

SATURDAY MORNING SERVICE AND TORAH STUDY. We will having our chanted service at **9:30** and our **TORAH STUDY** at **10:30**. This week's portion is [VAYIGASH](#) (*click for URJ site*) wherein Judah begs for his brother Benjamin's life, Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, and the Israelites settle in Goshen, Egypt. Joseph also oversees the massive nationalization of private lands due to debt and hunger. . Click [here](#) for the text on SEFARIA.

Blessings,

David