



# Austin Shmirah

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## Thoughts on Shmirah

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### Thoughts on Shmirah and End of Life Curated by Gail Tosto



This is a space to share thoughts about the non-practical aspects of shmirah and death/end of life in general. Posts may touch on religious, spiritual, philosophical, psychological, historical, cultural, or mystical topics, as well as poetry or short fiction. Time will tell!

Send your writings on shmirah, death, dying, mourning, etc. to gailtosto at gmail period com. The two of us will take it from there, on an individual basis.

Thank you, Josef Zeevi, for your unfailing creativity in making this website all that it can possibly be.

--Gail

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## **We Pause**

by Robin Tikvah Barratt

Here and there our lives pause  
Where they float, diaphanous  
And tinged with silver tongues  
And fleeting fingers of doubt and love.....  
Here and there we pause to ask  
The simple questions--May we have water?  
Could existence change the angle  
Of the sun above?  
And we realize that our whole lives  
Have turned to pulses of soul light  
And energy.  
We have moved to the eternity  
Of poetry and physics.  
There are eleven months though we have  
No more words for them....  
Eleven months of prayer to keep us from  
Turning to the anger of ghosts  
Instead of the remembrances  
Of our communities.....  
For here and there we die  
To be brought forward on anniversaries  
And kept lace like in hearts  
Of those with imagination  
To bring us from part to whole  
We do not know on who/what's  
Coming we wait souls as we are  
Of particles just a bit like the breath  
We were so confident of before death

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## **What's So Unique About Death?**

by Gail Tosto

Austin Shmirah Facilitator

Congregation Agudas Achim Shmirah Coordinator

Aspiring End-of-Life Doula

It goes without saying that death is like no other life experience. The most obvious reasons are that it's so unknowable, so final, and so mysterious in nature. But I think the uniqueness of death, and its ability to instill fear and repulsion in us, can be broken down into smaller components that are easier to understand. Here I share some personal insights into what makes death so different from everything else we expect to encounter in life.

**Death is the only life cycle event that can happen at any point in the lifeline.**

With the exception of death, biological and cultural life cycle events happen on a timeline that's at least somewhat predictable. An example: Once a pregnancy occurs, we can predict that it will take approximately nine months for a live birth to take place. True, the window for survival of premature babies is gradually expanding. Even so,

pregnancies lasting more than 10 months are freakishly rare; the record, in 1945, was 375 days. And to date, no child has survived a birth that occurs three days, three weeks, or two months after conception. In short, a live birth can be pinpointed to occur within a window of just a few months.

Likewise, there are upper and/or lower time boundaries for biological milestones such as teething, learning to walk, puberty, child-bearing, and menopause. Some of these ranges can span years or decades – there are early and late bloomers in puberty, and a woman can give birth multiple times over a period of 25 years or more. But it's unheard of for a one-year-old to become a father or a 90-year-old to get her first period.

Also predictable is the sequence of events. Invariably, a child is conceived before he is born; is born before he teethes (thank goodness!); teethes and is toilet trained before she enters puberty; and enters puberty before she reproduces.

Socially and culturally as well, there's a general lower age limit for events such as bar/bat mitzvah or first communion, school attendance, getting a driver's license, quinceañera, high school graduation, marriage, retirement, etc. These lower age limits are culturally defined and have occasional exceptions – the genius who goes to college at age 11 and the child bride, for example. But even these rare exceptions are rarely shocking surprises for those involved. We can see these events coming months or years in advance. When a baby is born, we can predict what year he's likely to graduate high school, give or take a year.

The exception is the timing and predictability of death. Death is the only life cycle event that can really sneak up on us. It can happen at any time after conception, before or after any other milestone. It has a myriad of possible causes, including accidents, diseases, acts of violence, and natural disasters.

Death is also the only life cycle event besides conception that everyone is guaranteed to have. Not all fetuses live to be born. Not all infants live to teethe, walk, or be toilet trained. Not all teenagers graduate high school. Not all adults enter the work force, lose their virginity, marry, or have children. Only conception and death – the very beginning and the very end of life – are guaranteed for all.

The unpredictability of when and how death will occur is one of the things that make it so frightening. We are shocked when a person dies of an unexpected cause or dies before experiencing most of the other life cycle events that we had anticipated for them.

**Death is the only thing nature requires of us for which we don't seem to have an instinct.**

In order for any species to thrive without overrunning the earth, a critical mass of its members must accomplish a number of tasks: survive and thrive into maturity; reproduce; provide the next generation with whatever nurturing is necessary to reach independence; and, finally, get out of the way – in other words, die, replenish the nutrients in the soil, and make room for new life. All but the last task require our cooperation, and instincts help ensure that cooperation. A variety of survival instincts compel us eat, sleep, and avoid danger. Once we reach reproductive age, our sex drive and mating instincts enable us to conceive and birth a new generation. Maternal (parental?) instincts help us usher our young into adulthood, whereupon the cycle repeats. All of this entails considerable work, sacrifice, and initiative. Instincts help enough of us to follow through.

But that last obligation in the circle of life – to get out of the way by dying – doesn't seem to be tied to any clear instinct. That's all for the best. A death instinct would counteract all the other instincts that help keep us alive long enough to accomplish all of our other tasks. In any case, a death instinct is unnecessary because death requires little to no cooperation from the dying individual.

I suspect the universal repulsion we feel toward death can be accounted for largely by our lack of an instinct to seek it out, coupled with the presence of so many other instincts that help us stay alive.

**Death is the only life event with which the “experts” have less experience than the ones they help through it.**

All babies are birthed by people who have personally been born. A woman who's having her first baby can find plenty of other women, including obstetricians and midwives, who've given birth themselves. If you want to earn a PhD, become a skilled artisan, or learn to play the piano, you can study or apprentice under someone who has

already mastered what you're aspiring to. If you're diagnosed with an unfamiliar disease, you can find a support group of others who "really get it" and can offer practical advice. You may even be able to find a "double expert": a specialist in that disease who lives with it herself.

The one area in which we cannot get assistance from someone who's been through it personally is death. Not a single one of those who care for us at the end of our lives – health care providers, hospice workers, chaplains and clergy, end-of-life doulas, funeral directors, taharah caregivers, shomrim, medical examiners, hearse drivers, grave diggers, headstone engravers, etc. – not one of these "experts" has yet been through the experience of dying. Even a person who's had a "near death experience" and feels they were revived after dying did not get all the way through death. Death is unique in obliging us to turn to less experienced people for help.

### **Death is a rare life event through which no two people can help each other.**

We can meet many of our needs by buddying up with one other person in a tradeoff. A pair of neighbors can water each other's plants while one or the other is away. Two hairstylists can arrange to cut each other's hair for free. Two best friends can share each other's secrets, babysit each other's children, lend each other money, and console each other in times of mourning. Once again, death is the clear exception: You cannot bury anyone who buries you. Care of the dead is not a closed-loop buddy system. The chain of caregivers for the dead always needs new links, because no one who has received such care can ever give it to anyone else who needs it in the future.

### **Death is the life cycle event that we're most hesitant to prepare for, and most likely to be discouraged from preparing for by others.**

Imagine you're about to birth or adopt a child; or you're a tween who's a year or two away from bar/bat mitzvah; or you're a high school senior about to graduate; or you're engaged to be married. Now imagine refusing to prepare yourself for the upcoming event or even to acknowledge that it's going to happen. Would that be wise? How would the people around you react to your refusal to learn to change a diaper, practice your Haftarah reading, either enlist in the military or fill out a college or job application, or plan your upcoming wedding?

Now imagine instead that you *do* acknowledge that your major, life-changing event is on the horizon and you *are* willing to prepare for it. You take a Lamaze class, or practice your Haftarah reading, or apply to college, or attend a workshop on communication with your fiancé. In response, your obstetrician, your parents, your rabbi, your guidance counselor, or your best man assure you that there's no need to focus on the upcoming event. They advise you to live in the moment and never lose hope that the event can be avoided indefinitely. Imagine that when you talk about your fears, concerns, curiosity, or hopes concerning the big occasion, the people in your life uncomfortably change the subject or try to convince you that it's not actually going to happen.

This is how many of us treat the topic of death. For many, any discussion of/preparation for the inevitable – buying a burial plot, writing a will, talking about your funeral preferences with your family – is considered morbid, taboo, or even a jinx and a self-fulfilling prophesy. Even people who are clearly approaching the end of their lives can have trouble talking about the details or finding someone who's willing to explore the topic with them. In short, death is our most neglected, most denied life cycle event.

### **Conclusion**

While death is a natural life cycle event, it's also naturally mysterious and frightening. For many, the entire topic is repulsive or taboo. I believe there are specific reasons for which reactions of fear and denial are so commonplace. While death will inevitably remain a great mystery to us during our lifetimes, perhaps our fears around it can be identified and explored to our benefit. Perhaps such exploration can help to ease our fear and dread of this great unknown.

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### **Another Plane**

by Lori Kline, Austin Shmirah Member

Outside my window, I view blades of grass bend in the breeze and imagine softness of the wind against my cheek. Sunlight and shade create a patchwork on the lawn. Were I outside, would the blades tickle my bare feet? I ponder this plane of existence. What is the meitah's? Does she "see?" Does she experience the breeze as I do? Or is all different? Does she miss her favorite flower, or treat or relative or friend? Is she even aware of them? I imagine she is free, perhaps soaring like an eagle above. I've always wanted to shluf on a cloud. Can she now? I hope so.

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### **Undo it, Take it Back**

by Nessa Rapoport; published in the magazine Lilith, Winter 2001-2002

Submitted by Harriet Saikin (member of Temple Beth Shalom, Austin, TX)

Undo it, take it back, make every day the previous one  
until I am returned to the day before the one that made  
you gone. Or set me on an airplane traveling west,  
crossing the date line again and again, losing this day,  
then that, until the day of loss still lies ahead, and you  
are here instead of sorrow.

**Nessa Rapoport** is author of a novel, *Preparing for Sabbath*, and of *A Woman's Book of Grieving*, from which this prose poem is drawn.

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### **Virtual Shmirah:**

#### **Getting My Bearings in a New Tradition**

By Michel Munguia (member of Temple Beth Shalom, Austin, TX)

As a night owl, I prefer to do late-night and wee-early-morning shmirah shifts, but actually going to the funeral homes at those hours is creepy. It's not being with the dead that I have a problem with. The problem is the live beings that may be lurking outside the building at those hours. So virtual shmirah is perfect for me!!!

On the other hand, since we switched to virtual shmirah, the Jewish concept of the four higher aspects of the soul – Ruach, Neshamah, Chayah and Yechida – staying close to the body after the lowest aspect, the Nefesh, has left it, seems to be fading from my mind. So I've been looking for a way to reconnect with this concept.

If the Nefesh has suffered tremendously or separates from the body quickly and without warning, the other aspects of the soul will have suffered as well. They need to heal before they can leave this plane. A person doing shmirah helps in this healing by staying not only with the body, but also with the other aspects of the soul, so that they can move on and leave this plane peacefully. It is sad to think of how many people out there do not have the benefit of this process. Their souls just roam amongst us trying to understand what happened at the end of the life of their physical partner, the body.

In virtual shmirah, shomerim cannot sit physically near the body. But I have found meaning in another spiritual concept, in which the remaining aspects of the soul travel to their favorite places throughout the world until they finally leave this plane. This is the first and last time that the soul experiences the break of the astral silver thread to the body, which happens because the Nefesh is gone.

I have come to think that we can summon the soul's various aspects to us, as they have the freedom to travel if they are not too traumatized to leave the body.

In sitting near the body, I had never thought to bring my laptop with me. I know the meit/ah only by the obituary provided in the designated place to sit. As we have gone virtual, I am more prone to utilize my laptop to access the tools on the websites of Kavod v'Nichum, the funeral home, and Austin Shmirah. I have had time to read the obituary (bio) of the deceased prior to sitting. This way I can find the inspiration to become familiar with the aspects of the deceased person's soul and more easily summon them to me for our "visit."

I found, with my first virtual shmirah, that the meitah, Tegan, was a vibrant, activist lover of life. She had a great sense of humor, cared for humanity, and was a warrior who had won many battles against cancer but eventually lost the war. She lived and died in California, 1,700 miles from where I was doing shmirah for her. I thought a person like Tegan would be so bored with me just sitting there reading Tehilim and other inspirational literature. I decided it would be pretty rude of me to summon her to travel all the way from California just for that!

So instead, I stepped outside of the box and did the following.

- I introduced myself as her shomeret and thanked her for coming to Austin, Texas to visit. I played Jewish liturgical music for her and some calm Klezmer. I sang along a little bit for her.
- We (yes, as time went by, I sensed her presence enough to imagine that we were in this together) watched some videos of cantors and choirs singing, sacred music and poetry from Israel, and sources from the Virtual Shmirah Library (which is great!) at <https://www.jewish-funerals.org/virtual-shmirah-box/>.
- I read Tehilim and some of Ecclesiastes (Chapter 3 is very apropos to what we are going through right now), with background music.
- I read the interpretation of Moses' death from Ellen Frankel's *The Classic Tales: 4,000 Years of Jewish Lore*.


When my shift was coming to an end, I told Tegan it was time for her to go to the next shomer(et) who was summoning her. I told her that I had had a wonderful time during our visit. I thanked her for the honor of her visit and wished her a continued joyous journey to the next plane.

Finally, I recited the Closing Prayer.

I know this way of doing shmirah is a bit unconventional, but then, so was Tegan!

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