

# Mourning rites

by [Stephen Prothero](#) in the [February 27, 2002](#) issue

*When a Jew Dies: The Ethnography of a Bereaved Son.* By Samuel C. Heilman. University of California Press, 271 pp., \$29.95.

Samuel C. Heilman begins his terrific book with a terrible cliché: In the United States "the denial of death and a desire to keep it from view are part of the basic outlook." This view, which is now standard fare in books on death and dying, is as false as it is tired.

As anyone mildly conversant with American popular culture can attest, Americans are obsessed with death, which is as ubiquitous in films and on television today as it was when Bambi's mother first expired on the silver screen in 1942. That academics miss this obvious fact may say something about their TV-viewing habits, but it likely says more about their desire to see themselves as intrepid explorers boldly going where no scholar has gone before--a want far more palpable than the supposed desire of Americans to deny death.

Happily, the book improves markedly after the opening. It proceeds on two tracks. Heilman is a professor of Jewish studies and sociology at the City University of New York. He is also a child of concentration camp survivors whose father died in 1996. Rather than suppressing one of these identities, Heilman alternates between them, speaking in two distinct voices (and typefaces) throughout.

As a social anthropologist, he delves into the history of Jewish burial practices and offers insightful interpretations rooted in years of being a participant-observer in Jewish burial societies in Israel and around New York City. As a bereaved son, he describes with admirable honesty his own bewilderment upon learning of his father's death and the chaos that descended upon him as he rent his garments and marked himself as a mourner. The result is a first-rate introduction to Jewish death rites, rewarding to scholars and general readers alike.

Heilman organizes his book temporally, devoting chapters to specific periods between death itself and *yahrzeit*, the 12-month anniversary of an individual death.

Along the way he introduces his readers to *tahara* (the ritual purification of the dead), *leveiya* (the funeral), *shivah* (the seven days after death) and *shloshim* (the 30 days of mourning). Heilman explains widely known Jewish traditions, such as burying the dead with their feet toward Jerusalem and marking graves with pebbles. He also explores more obscure rites. For example, Jews traditionally open the windows of the room where someone has just died to allow the spirit of the dead to escape, and place the corpse on the floor to facilitate the body's return to the earth. After the corpse is dressed in simple white linen garments and lowered into the traditional plain wood coffin, the fingers are uncurled, Heilman writes, "as if to show that the dead took nothing material along from the world."

Heilman is a committed traditionalist who laments what he calls the "increasing secularization, depersonalization and profanation" of Jewish rites of death. He attributes efforts to update those rites in large measure to misunderstandings of the meanings and ends of Jewish traditions, and describes his book as an effort to correct those misunderstandings.

What Heilman misses is the fact that many Jews--especially Reform Jews, whom the book largely ignores--have rejected traditional rites not because they are opaque but because they are transparent. They don't believe in the resurrection of the body, for example, and they are unmoved by the mystical and numerological musings about death that plainly comfort Heilman.

In modern societies, and particularly in the contemporary U.S., religion has become something you choose rather than something you inherit. Some American Jews have tried to combine Judaism and Buddhism, observing both the Sabbath and the precepts of the Buddha. Many more have remained fully and exclusively inside the Jewish community, while agitating internally for changes in the rites of circumcision, marriage and death.

Unfortunately, *When a Jew Dies* ignores the lamentations of these Jews. Surely Heilman is well equipped to interpret emerging Jewish rites of cremation, for example. But he is content instead to label cremation a "counterfeit" practice, and leave it at that. At least in this case, Heilman's personal voice drowns out his scholarly voice, and his book is the poorer for it.

Still, this is an immensely rewarding book. Not only is Heilman an insightful interpreter of Jewish rites and an honest investigator of his own hopes and fears, he is also a wise man who has much to teach Jews and *goyim* alike about living in the

face of death. Especially in times like ours, such wisdom is welcome indeed.