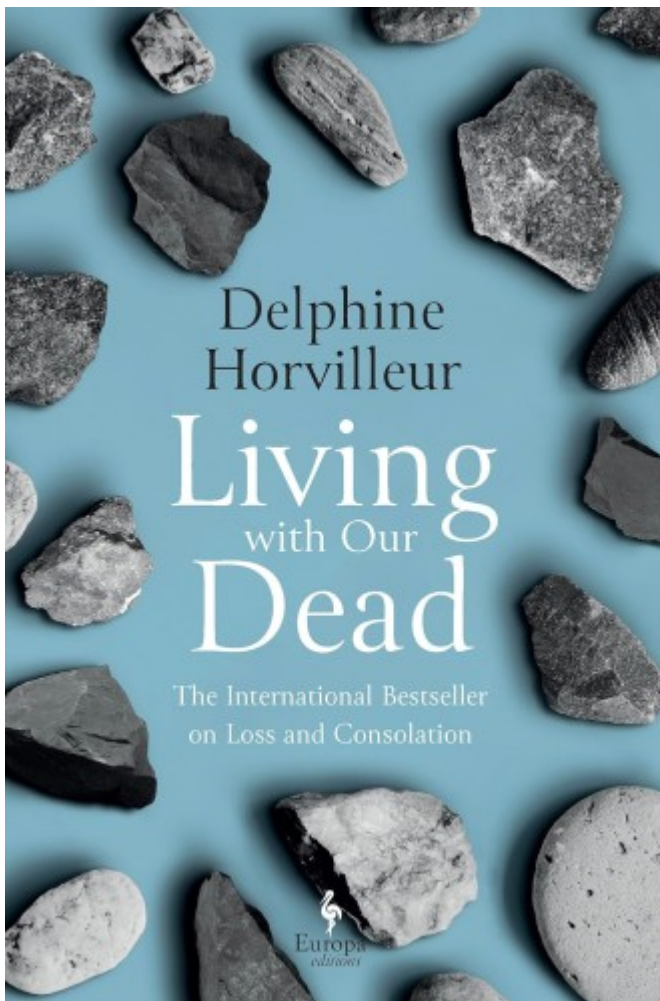


More than eulogies

French rabbi Delphine Horvilleur reflects on 11 funerals to paint a vibrant picture of Jewish life.

by [Beth Kissileff](#) in the [January 2025](#) issue
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In Review



Living with Our Dead

On Loss and Consolation

By Delphine Horvilleur, translated by Lisa Appignanesi

Europa Compass

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

The paradox of a slim book is that it can be dense. The weight of the words feels more significant, heavier, when there are fewer of them; each word and sentence has more work to do. When a book like this is successful, as *Living with Our Dead* is, the length of the chapters bears no connection to the power and depth of the writing.

Delphine Horvilleur is a French rabbi who leads a congregation in Paris. In this book, she tells the stories of 11 people, most of whose funerals she officiated at. But it's more than just a collection of eulogies. Each chapter has a different theme, and as the book unfolds readers encounter various aspects of Jewish history and learn about the diverse lives led by French Jews.

She writes about a "Birkenau girl" who survived the concentration camp as a teenager and went on to become the first female president of the European Parliament, a beloved psychoanalyst and writer who was murdered in the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine shooting, and a young boy whose grieving brother asks unfathomable questions at the funeral. With both an accessible style and references to Jewish texts and Hebrew etymologies, this book should become an instant classic, sharing shelf space with Harold Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

At the funeral of one elderly woman who survived Auschwitz, only one mourner is present—the woman's son. Horvilleur's job as a rabbi at this time is "simply talking of this woman to the very man who had told me everything I now knew about her." Still, she puts as much care into this woman's eulogy as she does for those whose funerals gather large crowds. She later reflects on what makes this particular tribute so meaningful:

What I did was to translate his words into my own language, so that he would hear them differently. . . . I think that I had never better understood my role as a celebrant at a cemetery: to accompany the grieving, not to teach them something they don't yet know but to translate what they have told me so that they in turn can actually *hear* it.

One role of the rabbi, she notes, is to create a dialogue between the words the mourners say and their “ancestral tradition,” to serve as a sort of intermediary.

The chapter she writes on the assassination of Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, titled “Israel,” is both a reflection on Rabin’s murder and a short primer on Zionism and the Hebrew language. She notes that her title as a female rabbi in French is “*rabbine*,” which is a homonym for the prime minister’s name. This is unsurprising, she says, because “Hebrew is always polyglot.” Even the Hebrew word for religion, *dat*, is a Persian word. Israel, like the Hebrew language, draws disparate people together around a common heritage: “With the memory of exile intact, this land will teach you to love an Other who you will agree to never fully understand or possess.” Horvilleur ends the chapter by reflecting on the revival of Israel’s ancient language as she hears her son speak it, marveling at “the way in which what we believe to be almost gone can be reborn elsewhere. Blessed are you, oh Lord, who revives the dead.”

A particularly poignant chapter tells the story of Ariane, a friend whose children are the same age as Horvilleur’s, who is diagnosed with brain cancer in midlife. Horvilleur connects her friend’s life and death with that of the biblical patriarch Jacob, whose family needed to prove to him that they would carry on his legacy. As he was dying, according to Genesis Rabbah 98:4, Jacob’s children proclaimed, “Hear O Israel” (Deut. 6:4), and he responded. She writes,

This is the solemn promise that Jews make at the time of a death: to integrate something of the departed’s life into their own in order to unite themselves with what they will become. They say to the dying, “Child of Israel, listen to what parts of you will carry on living within us, linked to us forever.”

Incorporating a portion of the values of the dead into the lives of the living is a bold and comforting assurance of legacy, Horvilleur demonstrates in this chapter.

Horvilleur writes in the introduction that after conducting a funeral, she can’t go straight home from the cemetery. She goes first to a café or shop, any kind of “elsewhere.” Why? “I create a symbolic airlock between death and my house. Out of the question to bring death home.” This raises a question: Why write a book that focuses on precisely that element of human existence that she refuses to have too much proximity to?

In an interview with *Tablet*, Horvilleur says that she wrote the book during the COVID pandemic, “the time when death was all around us.” (The French-language edition came out in 2021.) In it, she writes of the pandemic’s effect on society: “Death was reminding us that it had never really gone away, that it had assumed its rightful place, that our own power lay merely in choosing the words and gestures we would pronounce at the moment it chose to show itself.” By guiding us through the lexicon of those words and gestures, Horvilleur shows how they enable the living to continue on with hope and resilience.