

IN THE FACE OF DEATH

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Laura J. Padgett, *The Transitory*, 2024, photograph, 96 × 64.5 cm,
Jewish Museum Frankfurt



*The American artist Laura J. Padgett (*1958) explored the cemetery
hall and other buildings of the New Jewish Cemetery in Frankfurt
in a photo series in 2024.*

Notausgang







Traditional Jewish burial clothing (tachrichim), 2024, linen, Jewish Museum Frankfurt

◀ *Tachrichim are the traditional white garments for the dead, usually made of pure linen.*



Rony Oren, The Animated Haggada, 1992,
Scopus Films Ltd., Tel Aviv

*Glorified and sanctified be God's great name throughout the world
which He has created according to His will.
May He establish His kingdom in your lifetime and during your days,
and within the life of the entire House of Israel, speedily and soon;
and say, Amen.*

These are the words with which the most well-known Jewish prayer, the Kaddish, begins.¹ In the 12th century, it developed in the Ashkenazi communities along the Rhine to become a special prayer of mourning. While, previously, it had been spoken during the morning worship by all of those praying, from then on, the Kaddish was to be spoken by an orphaned boy during the Sabbath service in remembrance of his recently deceased father or mother. This change in context, however, did not involve any changes to the largely Aramaic text. In the Kaddish, which is spoken today in remembrance of the dead, death itself is not mentioned. Instead of commemorating the dead, the prayer praises the divine Creator and focuses on what God has yet to bring about: peace.

How did it come to pass that death was not mentioned, and why the clear orientation towards life in the most well-known Jewish prayer for the dead?² And to what extent does this omission reveal the wisdom of Jewish thinking? This book is dedicated to this and other fundamentally human questions concerning the differentiation between life and death. It is being published to accompany the first cultural-historical exhibition about Jewish practices surrounding dying, death and mourning. As such, this book expands the perspective of the exhibition at the Jewish Museum in Frankfurt by contributing aspects from comparative religion and anthropology, and it opens up a multi-perspective approach that provides us with new ways to look at the last chapter in life.

The exhibition “In the face of death” shows for the first time how Judaism developed a specific notion about death in antiquity, separating it ritually from life. At that time, the time of the wandering in the desert, the Babylonian exile and the kingdoms, the first practices developed to help people take their leave from, bury and mourn the deceased, and these have been passed down in the Mishnah tractate Moed Katan in the Talmud, among other places. This tractate explores the question of what activities are permitted on minor holidays, and as a consequence also deals with different rites of passage to be carried out by relatives in connection with death, and especially in connection with mourning rites, their duration and preparing a funeral.³ In the diaspora, these practices not only evolved further, but also took on different forms, in each case influenced by regional factors and their interaction with the customs of the respective societies

¹ — The translation is taken from *My Jewish Learning* (<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/text-of-the-mourners-kaddish/>). ² — See David Shyovitz: “You have saved me from the Judgement of Gehenna: The Origins of the Mourner’s Kaddish in Medieval Ashkenaz”, in: *AJS Review* 39/1 (2015),

pp. 49–73. ³ — See Michael Tilly: “‘Wenn ein Stein bewegt wird’ ... Tod und Trauer im Judentum in der römischen Kaiserzeit” [“When a stone is moved’ ... Death and Mourning during the Roman Empire”], in: *Antike Welt* 34/2 (2003), pp. 143–150.

in which they were located. The book's central point of reference, and that of the exhibition, is the Jewish community of Frankfurt, which came into being at around the same period in which the Kaddish was given a new function within Jewish worship.

Being aware of our finite nature and the question about the meaning of life are topics that occupy us as humans throughout our lives, and we confront them both in our individual life and in cultural and religious communities. Over the centuries, such questions have been answered by different civilisations in very different ways. In more secular societies, phenomena such as dying and mourning are generally afforded less attention than measures that tend to suppress matters related to death. An informed and conscious treatment of our own finiteness is replaced by a fear of death. The Jewish tradition responds to this fear with the attitude that life itself emerges and we are allowed to celebrate it particularly in the face of death. "To simchas" is what mourners say when they leave the cemetery following a Jewish funeral, which means as much as: "may we see one another next time at a joyful celebration".

The exhibition holds to this perspective and directs its attention towards the questions and processes that are involved in the rites of passage pertaining to the end of life and to death itself. It also explores ethical questions related to how we differentiate life from death. For example, when does death occur from a medical point of view? Is it permissible to bring about death prematurely by assisting this process?

"In the face of death" examines these fundamental questions in relation to the cultural-historical traditions of Judaism. The exhibition concentrates on the rites of passage that regulate the relationship between life and death, and between the living and the deceased. And it presents these in an architecture of clay and light that renders tangible the difference between the material nature of life and the immaterial sphere of the World to Come (in Hebrew: Olam Haba). In an attempt to open up to the visitor various approaches to the exhibits, works of art and media on show, different groups were invited to write texts about the exhibits that reflect their perspective of them. An extensive accompanying programme that runs parallel to the exhibition also provides more in-depth knowledge and experiences. In addition to events, guided tours and workshops, this also includes its own tour on the museum's media guide that takes either a focussed or a more in-depth look at the topics dealt with. Furthermore, a podcast accompanies the exhibition, featuring various experts that provide more expansive material on the themes of the exhibition. A digital remembrance book as well as online tours of cemeteries expand the area of thematic exploration beyond the museum's walls. And this exhibition catalogue not only invites readers to partake in a cultural exchange about the subject of death but also to reflect on Jewish remembrance and German commemoration after the Shoah.

The exhibition "In the face of death" and this book, as well as the extensive accompanying programme are the result of years of teamwork headed by Sara Soussan, Curator of Contemporary Jewish Culture at the Jewish Museum. My heartfelt gratitude goes to her for her intensive exploration of the topic, the courageous manner with which she approached her work, and her ability to motivate her team. I would also like to thank the two co-curators of the exhibition, Erik Riedel and Dennis Eiler as well as Rifka Ajnwojner and Duygu Rana Heinz, who developed the communications concept. The perfectly matched exhibition architecture was designed by YRD.Works, the communications and graphic design, also for this catalogue, came from Profi Aesthetics – and to every member of these collectives I also give my sincerest thanks. Besides objects from the collection of the Jewish Museum, the exhibition and this catalogue also show numerous exhibits from other collections, for which I would also like to thank our lenders. I am grateful, too, to all of the authors in this book, and to the members of the research council, Rabbi Dr. Jehoschua Ahrens, Prof. Elisabeth Hollender, Shelly Kupferberg and Prof. Andreas Raabe, who were always there to support my colleagues and me by contributing their guidance and resources to the exhibition concept. My thanks also go to Philipp Hartmann, who is responsible for the text management and editing of this book, and to Ryan Carlson and Lindsay Jane Munro for their translation of it. The collaboration with our accomplished creative, intellectual and expert partners was a great experience at all times.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank those people whose support made our wide-ranging cooperation and its outcome, that is the exhibition, its accompanying programme and this book, possible in the first place: the Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States (Kulturstiftung der Länder) and the Art Mentor Foundation Lucerne. We were very happy that these renowned benefactors have placed their trust in the Jewish Museum. And I hope that they are happy with the result of our work. Finally, I wish you, dear readers, not only an inspiring read but also a fruitful exploration of the human desire to understand death, or perhaps more accurately, to understand life in relation to death.

Introduction to the exhibition “In the face of death”

Rock musician and Doors frontman Jim Morrison (1943–1971) was not pulling any punches – death is something that none of us can avoid.¹ It will come for us personally, and first touches us when we lose people who are close to us. We all have to deal with it, but usually we don’t. We turn it into a taboo subject and surround the entire topic of death with fear and terror, sometimes even approaching it with a kind of morbid fascination. Such taboos may be necessary and right in the sense of an archaic self-preservation; however, they do not really help us in any meaningful way, either individually, personally or even collectively.

“No matter how bad things get, you’ve got to go on living, even if it kills you.” This was the author Scholem Alejchem’s (1859–1916) approach to the topic, opening up deeply Jewish perspectives on the relationship between life and death. Where does death challenge us in life? How can we deal with its omnipresence in life? And what maxims result from this? We have taken a look into the “face of death” in order to examine these Jewish perspectives more closely and render them tangible to a diversified public. This opens up new dimensions of life, broadening personal horizons to include Jewish cultural approaches and perspectives on death, and allows Jewish perspectives to become catalysts for further perspectives on society and life itself.

The dead place – the house of life

The old Jewish cemetery on Battonnstrasse in Frankfurt, which was in use from the 12th century until 1880, makes a strikingly lively impression: an astounding number of Jews from all over the world come to visit it. Only to this cemetery, and not necessarily the other Jewish places in the city. People visit the graves, pray and supplicate there. But why?

“Before there was order in Germany, when it was tumultuous and ravaged by the burdens placed upon it by kings and princes, this city, the holy municipality of Frankfurt, had already been a queen for a long time, with a pure crown upon its head ...”²

¹ – The title of this text is a quote from the Doors song *Five to One* from 1968. ² – Rabbi Josef Kaschmann: “Noheg Kazon Yosef 1718”, in: Karl Erich Grözinger (ed.): *Jüdische Kultur in Frankfurt am Main von den Anfängen bis zur*

Gegenwart [Jewish Culture in Frankfurt/Main from its Beginnings to the Present], Wiesbaden 1997, p. VII (own translation).

Frankfurt is a city with a long and rich Jewish history whose legacy left traces around Europe. In the Judengasse, which was established as a forced ghetto as far back as 1462, a diverse and widely known rabbinical scholarly tradition developed and attracted Jews from all over Europe for centuries. Today – following the rupture caused by the Shoah – only the surviving literature, and the cemeteries with graves of many known Jewish personalities, bear testimony to this former grandeur.

One focal aspect here is the gravestones of the Frankfurt scholars who made an impact both in and out of Frankfurt in the past centuries. Another is the unusual surge of visitors often seen at a woman's grave, namely that of Reisele Sofer (deceased in 1828), mother of the famous Frankfurt scholar Chatam Sofer (1763–1840). With their fleeting trips to the cemetery, visitors establish a connection between Frankfurt's Jewish past and a universal and global Jewish present – a cemetery comes alive, and the impact of the dead becomes anchored in the collective memory of the Jewish world: "The dead must not be allowed to become statistics."³

A Hebrew term for cemetery is *בית החיים* – "House of life" or "House of the living". Seeking the traces of this life in this special place was the goal of a film project in interview form, which ultimately played a decisive role in the concept for this exhibition about death at the Jewish Museum in Frankfurt.

Death in life

What approach should an exhibition on death take from a Jewish perspective? How can it present a topic that is taboo, incites fear and is highly emotional, a topic that affects every visitor personally in some way? And what can it offer to those who may be in mourning? All these considerations required a sensitive approach to planning the exhibition, which meant inviting potential visitors to an audience-development project early on in the first conceptual phase. Very different people and groups examined the planned exhibits and then wrote texts to describe the objects from their own perspective. These will appear in the exhibition instead of labels written by the curators. This process was supported by Rifka Aijnwojner and Duygu Rana Heinz from the educational team, who also categorised the project in terms of its academic relevance in this publication.



Yahrzeit candles, Wax candle in tin can, 6 × 5.5 cm, Jewish Museum Frankfurt

◀ *Memorial lights are lit annually in memory of the deceased on the anniversary of their death and on some Jewish holidays.*

What I see at first glance is a can. The can says: Memorial Candle. This means that it is in memory of a person. I think the candle looks good. The plug-in light, which is also for remembrance, looks scary. It is similar to the candle, but modern, and also scary. The memorial light from the socket resembles a night light. There is something in Hebrew on both of them. I think they are prayers. This reminds me of cemeteries. Cagan, 12

Plug-in memorial light, 7.5 × 5 cm,
Jewish Museum Frankfurt

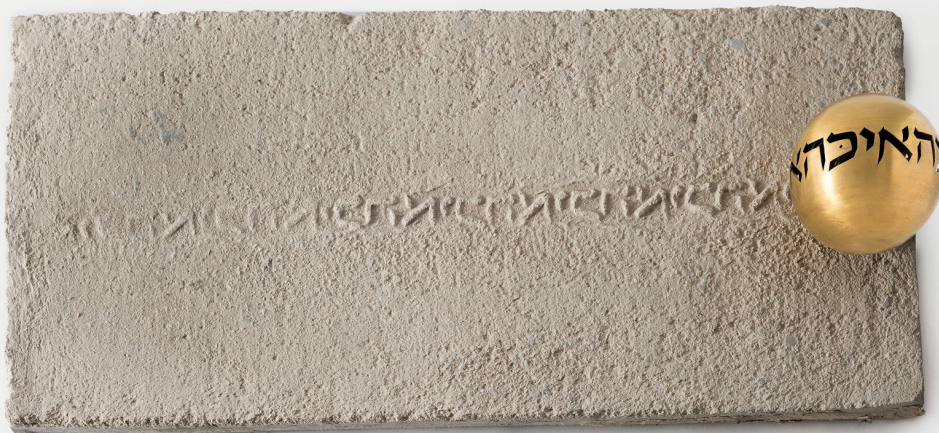


3 – Menachem Z. Rosensaft: “Srebrenica Elegy. A poem for the 28th anniversary of the genocide in Srebrenica”, in: *Tablet Magazine*, 11/07/2023, available online at: <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/srebrenica-elegy> (last accessed on 28/05/2024).

Where are you? The ball is working inside of me. I feel sadness and compassion. It reminds me of an infinite marble run, in which a marble rolls on and on and can't find the end. It seems like the ball has no end until it reaches its target. It's beautiful, but also sad at the same time. Because you know that someone in the world is missing someone special. Liam, 11

Sari Srulovitch, Ayekkah – Where are you?, 2021, brass sphere, Ø 18 cm, collection of the artist

▼
"Ayekkah", God asks Adam in the Torah: "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9). The artist Sari Srulovitch integrates this question into her modern interpretation of a memorial light. This question appears again and again in the Hebrew letters of the broken ball and in the traces it leaves behind in the sand. The repetition of "Ayekkah" expresses the sad loss, but at the same time extends the lament to the fragility of life and the constant search for morality, spirituality and humanity.



The exhibition structure follows the Jewish practices around dying and mourning that are expressed in many different practices and rituals. In this way, it provides multilayered insights into everyday Jewish cultures seen in relation to current challenges. The visitors can more closely examine the exhibition themes across aesthetic layers, where the exhibition design is neither dark nor oppressive in its presentation, but rather conceptualised by the artists' collective YRD.Works⁴ to be lively, atmospheric and gentle. The visitor encounters a choice of different forms of presentations in the exhibit design, made up of a broad mix of three-dimensional objects, audio and video stations, as well as artistic explorations. This variety invites discussion and represents a starting point from which approaches can be further developed, both individually and collectively. People come into the exhibition with their own personal questions, life stories and experiences and are given a chance to interactively explore the topics dealt with from different perspectives and to develop their own positions, which will go into and stay in the museum's documentation.

This exhibition catalogue expands on, deepens, and adds to the themes of the exhibition in many different ways, thus becoming a fund of the cultural and religious perspectives on human life in this world and in the beyond.

In the face of death

The omnipresence of death and its effect on us is revealed in numerous facets. The exhibition picks up on these and follows a systematic structure with several thematic rooms.

The exhibition opens visually with "The face of death", showing graphic manifestations of death in the form of paintings, sculptures, and book illustrations. The exhibition's co-curator, Erik Riedel deals in this catalogue with images that personify death, illuminating Jewish conceptions of this in the process. Dr. Eva Atlan gazes at death through the lens of art shaped by the Shoah, taking a closer look at the artists Samuel Bak and Ori Gersht, while Prof. Alfred Bodenheimer explores literary perspectives on the face of death after 1900.

The room titled "Dying", concentrates on Jewish religious guidelines and rituals around the process of dying and how the dying are cared for, which are considered in relation to current socio-political discourses – for instance, assisted suicide or organ donation. Prof. Andreas Raabe takes a medical look at death, the dying process and immortality, while Rabbi Dr. Jehoschua Ahrens provides some rabbinical observations on the practices surrounding dying, burial and mourning. Rabbi Julian-Chaim Soussan brings together both approaches and explores the medical ethics challenges that exist in connection with death. Prof. Avriel Bar-Levav then allows the reader to share in the mystical observations of Frankfurt Rabbi Naftali Ha-Cohen Katz from the early 18th century, thus rounding off the Frankfurt Jewish perspectives in this catalogue.

The "house of life and of the living" can be seen in the interview film "Der Gute Ort" (The Good Place), which was made as part of a research project in Frankfurt's Jewish cemeteries and is being presented in the exhibition. This offers a view of the uniqueness of these burial sites, and their power of attraction in the present is explored and reflected upon. Dennis Eiler, as curatorial assistant, tells us in this catalogue about the production of the film, while Michael Lenarz deals extensively in his article with the Jewish cemeteries in the region, providing a valuable inventory of them.

The "Funeral" section is dedicated to the varied objects and practices that have surrounded burial since Biblical times, which form the basis for today's funeral ceremonies. The meaning of the burial rites became painfully conspicuous for the relatives of the deceased when these could not be practiced during the Covid pandemic. The pandemic and the restrictions on collective gatherings, meant that funerals and mourning customs in the traditional sense were only possible in a very limited extent. This special situation is shown to visitors in a film.

The question concerning the relationship between life and death, the living and the dead, becomes particularly tangible in the "Mourning" room. Here, spaces for reflection provide an opportunity to explore one's own mourning in a participatory way.

In the context of family and individual remembrance, Shelly Kupferberg describes her literary journey in the footsteps of her ancestor Isidor in her contribution to this catalogue, which ultimately turned into a personal memorial to him.

4 – www.yrd.works.

The video installation “My Father in the Cloud” by Israeli artist Ruth Patir (born in 1984), which is being shown in the exhibition, explores a new phenomenon, what it is like to lose someone in an era in which their digital presence can continue to exist beyond death. She uses digital technology to reveal new perspectives and horizons. Following the death of her father, she experimented with the possibilities of resurrection or life after death by creating an avatar. “I could dance with him again”, she says in the film. And so she simulates his presence, assesses the possibility of creating new memories of him and allows us to take part in this process.



Ruth Patir, My Father in the Cloud, 2022, video still

The varied forms that the culture of remembrance takes, highlight the wide-ranging Jewish concept of remembering the dead, also in the shared remembrance of medieval pogroms, the Shoah, and the massacre of 7 October 2023 in Israel. Dr. Laura Viviana Strauss looks at therapeutic facets of a Jewish culture of resilience and allocates them to traditional thinking. In her text, Prof. Elisabeth Hollender looks more deeply into forms of remembering pogroms in the liturgy, thus tracing a line through the shared commemoration of historical events.

With “Olam Haba – The World to Come”, the exhibition brings visitors back to the thematic starting point of the exhibition and beyond. It leaves them with impressions of Jewish ideas and source texts about the life hereafter without finding universally applicable answers for this. Prof. Johanna Rahner provides a summary of Christian notions concerning death and what comes after in her contribution, while Gülbahar Erdem presents Islamic concepts. Prof. Birgit Heller’s comparative religious analyses covers a broad spectrum, while Dr. Avishai Bar-Asher takes a deep dive into Jewish ideas about afterworlds.

Into the face of death

Death has many faces, affecting us sometimes personally and sometimes collectively. To make death accessible in life is the universal task that every society must set itself. Accessibility means finding a way of coping with death, also in our own encounters with it. The relationship we have with our dead is reflected in Jewish culture of remembrance, and Jewish perspectives have much to offer in the form this remembrance takes. Our challenge was to provide this offer in a multi-perspective and emotionally accessible way. Death must be explored in life – and so let us look into the “face of death”!

IS THERE REALLY A HELL IN JUDAISM?

ASHKENAZI
RABBIS

WELL, IT'S MORE OF A
CLEANSING PROCESS
IN WHICH THE SOUL
BECOMES AWARE OF
THE CONSEQUENCES OF
THE CHOICES IT MADE.

SEPHARDI
RABBIS

Yes

X post: Is There Really a Hell in Judaism?, 2022



Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews – i.e. mostly European and Middle Eastern, respectively – sometimes have very different customs and traditions. The two sometimes differ greatly, particularly with regard to mystical views, such as the question of a world after death.