Palliative and Supportive Care

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A place to rest

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Essay/Personal Reflection

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> One short sleepe past, we wake eternally
> And death shall be no more, death thou shalt die
>
> John Donne, Holy sonnet X

Breitbart (2021) wrote a moving recollection of Barry Goldsmith who survived the holocaust, succeeded in America as an architect, only to drop out in the early 70s. Later he returned to a different mainstream, before arranging to have his body buried in Jerusalem, in *Har Hamenuchot* cemetery. It translates as *The Mountain of the Resting*. The present participle gives a sense that the resting are waiting. For what?

Associations unbidden took my thoughts to Tibetan Buddhism and the Sami of Northern Scandinavia.

Most theologies and religions believe that there is a soul, that it is immortal, and that it will be resurrected in a future period. There is disagreement whether the revivification will be purely spiritual or together with the body.

Maimonides states that this is one of the 13 fundamental beliefs of Judaism. The soul will be resurrected together with the body and will return to Jerusalem in the messianic era. The theological origin is not clear although support is derived from the prophet Ezekiel (d. c.572 BCE) and his story of the Valley of Dry Bones (37:1–14):

> 'So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.
> Then.. the Sovereign LORD says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live." So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast legion (2). I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in The Land of Israel.'"

Ezekiel had been exiled to Babylon and many commentators think his surprisingly fresh imagery from 2,500 years ago is about a national recovery and return of the Jewish people in the future to Zion. Others have used it as eschatological evidence that the body and soul will be reunited and revivified — transmigrate — and only then return to the land of Israel.

Tibet is high in the mountains and so I associated it with *Har Hamenuchot* cemetery in Jerusalem which admittedly is a puny elevation by comparison — but nevertheless commands a marvelous view for the buried and their visitors. Sky burial is a Tibetan Buddhist funeral practice in which a human corpse is placed on a mountaintop to decompose while exposed to the elements or to be eaten by scavenging animals, especially carrion birds. In much of Tibet, the ground is permafrost or too rocky to dig a grave. Above the tree-line with fuel and timber scarce, sky burials were pragmatic and took the place of cremation.

The majority of Tibetan people follow Buddhism which teaches that spirits transmigrate. There is no need to preserve the body, as it is now an empty vessel. The deceased vessel provides food to sustain (other) living beings. The spirit continues its journey and the flesh is recomposed. The Buddhist belief teaches that the cycle of life thus continues in generosity and compassion for all beings.

The Sami of northern Scandinavia were shamanic animists prior to Christianity. Their eschatological beliefs were that each body contained two types of spirits: the "free soul" which moved on to the afterlife, while the "body soul" stayed behind. Because the body soul of the dead remained close to the living, the Sami took great care to treat their ancestors with respect. This included a proper burial to ensure a happy afterlife, followed by regular prayers and offerings at sacred sites.

In the rocky permafrost of northern Scandinavia, it was not possible to bury the dead in the dead of winter. Sometimes, they wrapped the corpses in sleds or placed them in hollows of trees. Mostly though the body was wrapped in birch bark, placed on the ground, then covered loosely with small stones (scree graves) near scared sites away from the village. Burial like this allowed an easy escape of the "free soul" spirit. Sometimes, they waited till spring to bury the body in its final resting place, since they were partly nomadic and had to travel back to their sacred sites.

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The similarities between Tibetan, Jewish, and Sami burial customs and beliefs are of interest.

1. Each has a sacred area for the dead.
2. Each believes in a spirit or soul that is immortal.
3. Burial customs are influenced by the environment. [Judaism prescribes burial within 24 h which is sensible in the hot climate of Israel].
4. Each believes that the soul leaves the corpse and migrates.

One is unable to be rigid about the ultimate importance of a "proper" burial. Many die at sea or bodies are never found in the mountains or burnt in crematoria like the Germans did. Different environments determine different customs. We do the best we can to respect the dead and hence the living.

Goldsmith's obituary is a powerful story. Breitbart (2021) quoted the Talmud, the book of Jewish wisdom: "What is truer than the truth? The story".

Goldsmith's story (New York Times, 2021) is a wonderful summing up of a life well lived — he reconciled with his daughter, came back to his forebears, and was buried on a mountain near his father, where the souls of his people will be gathered in a messianic era. Goldsmith had his body flown half-way around the world from his nomadic wandering to the sacred burial spot in the mountain of the resting, waiting for the final redemption. A comforting thought for some.

Obituaries, cemeteries, palliative care, psycho-oncology, and *ars moriendi* are not to teach us that death is life. Fetishing death blocks the spirit from soaring.

The obituary is an ode to the living spirit.

Goldsmith reconciled with himself whilst alive. A grand lesson for life.

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