How we die is in large measure a reflection of how we live. As we confront this inevitability once again this High Holy Day season, let us consider taking steps to prepare for the moment that we take leave of this world. It will be a gift of comfort to ourselves and our families.

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# Jewish Rituals for the Sick and Dying

*Avriel Bar-Levav*

The structured mourning rituals of the Jews, such as the *shiva* with its specific demands from the mourners and their visitors, or saying kaddish, are quite well known. Far less known, however, is the existence of detailed rituals for people who are dying. Such rituals were created and printed during the 16th and 17th centuries, first in Italy and then throughout the Jewish world. These books formed a new genre in Jewish traditional literature, "books for the sick and the dying," and tell us something about the ways in which modernity both threatened and lent new forms of expression to Jewish identity.

The first herald of the new genre is a booklet (of 18 small pages) written by the colorful rabbi and prolific writer Leon Modena (1571-1648), and published in Venice in 1619. Modena named this booklet *Balm for the Soul and Cure for the Bone*. He wrote it (or actually compiled it, since he also used earlier sources) at the request of the governors of the Venice Ashkenazi burial society, the Chevra Kadisha, who complain in their introduction to the work about the lack of a prescribed Jewish death ritual. Moreover, they say, "when it is the turn of one of the members of our society to go and watch over the sick person, and to stand by him as is our custom, we do not have a ritual of what to recite and converse in order to escort the soul of this person when he is dying and give his soul back to God who granted it." The ritual he suggested includes, *inter alia*, an alphabetical confession, some Psalms, a concise credo, and a prayer for health.

A second book gave depth to the new genre. *Ma'avar Yabbok*, written by a young nephew of Leon Modena, Aaron Berechia Modena, and published in Manuta in 1626, is quite a voluminous book, with 112 chapters (112 is the numerical equivalence of the Hebrew letters comprising *Yabbok*). Only one of the chapters is dedicated to a ritual for the dying. The rest are packed with deep theoretical discussions related to death and other topics, written in a heavily dense and erudite Jewish traditional style. *Ma'avar Yabbok* inaugurated many small booklets named "short (*Kitzur*) *Ma'avar Yabbok*." In the book's name, *The Passage of Yabbok* (originally the place where Jacob crosses the River Jordan), is the symbol of passage from life to death. Dozens of booklets for the dying were printed in the following centuries, some of them with translations into Yiddish and other languages. Only at the outbreak of modernity, at the end of the 19th century, did the phenomenon of books for the sick and the dying almost cease.

What is the meaning of these books for the sick and the dying — their flowering and almost total disappearance? The attempt to ritually mold the time of death was part of a general process during the early modern period to ritualize Jewish life. Was it the attempt by a traditional society, sensing its near disintegration, to tighten its grasp over the life of the believers?

One reason for the disappearance of ritualized death is that death rarely happens in modern society in a private space where such rituals could be performed. Death occurs more frequently in hospitals, where only professionals are allowed near the dying person — medical professionals who try to fight death and save their patient's life. Death is often considered the failure of the physician, and not the destiny of all that is living. This attempt to conquer and deny death is symbolized in the rejection of the religious shaping of the time preceding death.

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