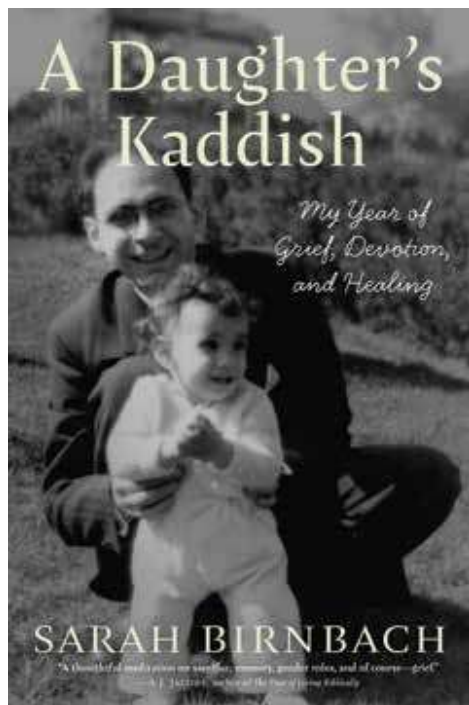




Good Grieving

Author Sarah Birnbach explores the power of Jewish prayer and mourning.

By Caryn S. Sagal

Author Sarah Birnbach:
"I became sensitive to others in mourning and learned that even though we can resume our normal activities, we never quite heal from the loss of a loved one."
 (Provided photo)

Sarah Birnbach has dedicated her entire life to helping people. After serving as a family therapist, human resource consultant and conference speaker, Birnbach, a Rockville resident, turned in 2016 to nonfiction writing.

Birnbach recently spoke at the Pikesville branch of the Baltimore County Public Library about her book, "A Daughter's Kaddish: My Year of Grief, Devotion, and Healing" (Wonderwell). Her talk is part of the library's speakers series.

The 2022 memoir chronicles her 11-month journey reciting the Mourner's Kaddish for her father at a synagogue *minyan*, despite his request that she hire a male to chant the prayer twice daily. Marvin E. Birnbach died in September of 2000.

The memoir received such honors as the Nautilus Book Award, the Independent Book Publishers

Association's Benjamin Franklin Award and the Independent Publisher Book Award.

"Birnbach's love letter to her father is a meditation on grief and the power of a spiritual practice to transcend our most painful losses," wrote the late Rabbi Mindy Avra Portnoy, author and rabbi emerita of Temple Sinai in Washington, D.C.

Jmore recently spoke with Birnbach, who is a two-time recipient of the *Bethesda Magazine* short story contest and a six-time winner of the Soul-Making Keats Literary Competition. She has written articles for *The Jerusalem Post*, *Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance Journal* and *Michigan Jewish History Journal*.

What message do you hope readers take away from your book? My goal is to impart an understanding of Jewish mourning rituals, the importance of community to help mourners heal, and how to support those who grieve. I hope the audience will come away recognizing that grief is not linear and that 'once a mourner, always a mourner.'

It's important to know that although someone may return to work or social activities and appear 'normal,' they are still hurting, and that expecting a mourner to recover from grief in a short period of time is unrealistic.

I also want people to support mourners by serving in minyans and being conscious of events that trigger grief (i.e. anniversaries, birthdays and holidays).

What motivated you to share your story? Besides wanting to help mourners and those who support mourners, I wrote the memoir to inspire rabbis and lay leaders to encourage women to recite the Mourner's Kaddish and make it easier for them to do so. I also wanted to inspire more women to undertake the prayer practice, even if they do so only once a week.

What did you learn about yourself while mourning? I learned that it was OK to be angry at God. I learned that I had more discipline and persistence than I thought possible. I learned that I could make a commitment and organize my entire life around it. And I learned to be grateful for the many blessings I do have in my life.

How did this experience change you?

I became sensitive to others in mourning and learned that even though we can resume our normal activities, we never quite heal from the loss of a loved one. I also discovered that grief can overwhelm us unexpectedly, but that's OK.

“Rather than isolate ourselves in grief, it helps to become part of a religious, spiritual, social or support community.”

—Sarah Birnbach

What advice do you have for those who are grieving? Rather than isolate ourselves in grief, it helps to become part of a religious, spiritual, social or support community.

How can we support mourners?

Don't just say, 'Let me know if you need anything,' because often someone in the throes of grief cannot contemplate what they want or need. Instead, offer something specific like driving carpool, grocery shopping, sending death certificates, doing laundry or taking the kids out.

What's your next project? I retraced my father's path through the frontlines of World War II Germany and am writing about it in my next book, 'In My Father's Footsteps.' I hope to complete the manuscript by year end.

What do you do in your spare time?

I'm active with [her synagogue's] *chevra kadisha*, women who perform the holy ritual of preparing a body for burial, midwifing the soul of the deceased from this world to the next. I also volunteer with [the nonprofit] Interfaith Works, and advocate to eradicate racism.

For fun, I enjoy sampling all things chocolate, frequenting bookstores, traveling, dancing and being an active grandma to seven grandchildren. 📍

Caryn R. Sagal is a Baltimore-based public relations consultant and freelance writer.

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