

A Community in Life = A Community in Death

Ruth Cooperman | Member, Temple Israel Long Beach



I’ve often wondered what it is like to be buried in the Rose of Sharon, the Jewish cemetery that is a part of the much larger non-denominational Forest Lawn facility in Long Beach, California. For my late parents, Bernie and Selma Cooperman, who are buried together in this space, it means being part of the neighborhood of Jewish families, many of whom have known each other for decades. The cemetery is filled with local people and their relatives whom I knew personally from my childhood onward.

I grew up in Long Beach and got to know many of my peers whose parents and other relatives rest here. Many of these elders were “extra” parents to me, like surrogate uncles and aunts, part of the mishpachah (family, in Yiddish) of greater Long Beach. My parents are now surrounded by old friends and acquaintances.

I recently attended back-to-back funeral services here for a couple, longtime family friends and both in their 90s, who passed away within a week of each other. Afterward, as I wandered about, reflecting on the couple who had lived full, expansive lives and then passed away so close to each other, I realized I knew many stories behind the names I read in the cemetery.

One couple had been our next-door neighbors during my teen years. In another, the wife had worked as the office manager of my dad’s busy orthopedic group for more than 30 years. In a different section of the cemetery, I spotted the grave of a lovely woman who, 60 years ago, had founded the marvelous school my son with special needs had attended.

Having lived here all my life, I know some of the stories that have been long-forgotten.

One is the sad tale of a jet plane that went down in San Diego more than 40 years ago, with a young woman aboard who was about the same age I was at the time. Buried along with her,

under the inscription, “Together forever,” is her mother, who, so aggrieved by the loss of her daughter, took her own life a year later. The community was rocked by these events at the time. Now, I don’t know if anyone is even aware of the story.

Now, when I visit my parents’ grave with my husband and grown sons, I feel as if the Rose of Sharon is its own microcosm of a Jewish world. Bernie and Selma, my mom and dad, are in a special place surrounded by other Jews, some very well known to them. Ironically, when they were living, they would often eschew sentiment and feelings of closeness or belonging to a group. They considered themselves too sophisticated, too aloof, to acknowledge their need of the community. Now, I see that, in spite of themselves, they are in truly good company.

When I first wrote this essay in late Summer 2019, it was a reflection of a pre-pandemic consciousness. Almost two years later, everything has changed, yet it in some ways it hasn’t. We still go to visit my parents’ grave site. My very silly husband will



Ruth Cooperman, with husband Michael Tate, at Forest Lawn.

say, “COVID didn’t bother them at all.” It’s true, it didn’t. Which is a good thing. They would not have liked the restrictions to attending their many concerts, plays, and travel, etc. At this time, I appreciate more than ever how enriched my life is because they were my parents. When they were alive, they epitomized class and culture, all of the higher things in life. Surely, my awareness of the world and all it has to offer started with them.



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