Dust to Dust: A History of Jewish Death and Burial in New York by Allan Amanik (review)

Peter B. Dedek

American Jewish History, Volume 105, Numbers 1/2, January/April 2021, pp. 290-291 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/ajh.2021.0020

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/804165

For content related to this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=article&id=804165

Dust to Dust “charts the ways in which funerary provisions served as an engine of changing communal life, as family, financial security, and consumerism grew in shaping Jewish approaches to death and burial over time” (8). From the arrival of the first Jews in New Amsterdam in the 1650s through 1960s New York with its many thriving Jewish communities, Amanik argues that the changing ways in which Jews honored and buried their dead helped shape the religious, social, and commercial relationships of Jewish New Yorkers as a whole. He also makes the argument that the practice of burying loved ones in exclusively Jewish burial grounds with traditional Jewish rites is a major way that Jews maintained their distinct identity through the centuries, even as they became increasingly integrated into the life, economy, and many cultures of New York.

Amanik’s book describes three major phases in Jewish death practices in New York. In the first, from the 1650s to around 1800, high status leaders of synagogues, such as Shearith Israel, the city’s first, used strict rules regarding death rites and burial in the exclusively Jewish burial grounds, which they owned, as a way to control their congregations. In the second phase, lasting from around 1800 to the early 1900s, many Jewish families expressed a desire to be buried together rather than in the traditional manner in which the dead were interred sequentially in rows according to their death dates, thereby challenging the authority of the synagogues. This second phase also saw the creation of a large number of Jewish burial and benevolent societies which afforded their members greater control over their lives generally and guaranteed their burial in a Jewish cemetery, decentering synagogues as the primary social service providers. After 1850, the old intermural Jewish burial grounds began to be replaced by larger and more fashionable rural cemeteries located outside the city, which further loosened the control of the synagogues and also encouraged the development of a private, for-profit Jewish funeral industry. During the third phase, which took place in the twentieth century, the Jewish funeral industry became increasingly commercialized, and the administration of traditional Jewish death rites became relatively lax until the 1960s, when a movement that emerged to reassert community control over funerals and burials resulted in increased adherence to tradition. While Jews were influenced by wider trends, such as the founding of burial societies and the move
to rural cemeteries, their cemeteries and their burial practices remained separate and distinct from those of other groups. This book helps the reader understand not only the history of Jewish burial in New York, but also the development and growth of the Jewish community as a whole.

Although Amanik’s book has a clear thesis and effectively relates the history of Jewish burial in New York, I would have liked to have seen more historical context, such a general discussion of traditional Jewish burial customs, to understand, for example, why early New York congregations buried their dead in sequential rows and to know whether or not Jews buried their dead in this manner in other places at the time. It also would have been helpful to have more comparisons between Jewish death and burial practices in New York and those in other American cities. Was New York typical or exceptional? In addition, having more information about the rural cemetery movement nationally would have demonstrated the ways in which the Jewish move to rural cemeteries was both part of a national trend yet also distinct from it. For example, the author describes the Jewish rural cemetery movement in New York as being particularly commercialized, but he does not point out that the majority of all nineteenth-century rural cemeteries were private, for-profit ventures, and that the non-Jewish cemeteries were just as commercial as the Jewish ones. Although the book itself is well designed, providing some illustrations of the traditional Jewish city graveyards and the rural cemeteries that replaced them would have helped the reader understand these historic places and how they differ from other New York burial grounds.

This well-researched and well written book takes the reader through the Jewish experience in New York using the lens of death and burial. It illustrates the immense concern and respect that the Jews of New York have had for their dead over the centuries. Dust to Dust will be well received by those interested in the history and the preservation of American cemeteries and by those wanting to engage in a new way of understanding the social, cultural, and religious history of Jews in New York.

Peter B. Dedek
Texas State University