

[MEMORIALIZATION]



October 2023

A Special Place to Mourn Pregnancy Loss

More than a decade ago, Jennifer Kaufman, then a grief counselor at Eternal Home Cemetery in Colma, California, met with Debbie Findling and Abby Porth, both of whom had experienced pregnancy loss.

By Stan Goldstein

Design Featured Memorialization [MEMORIALIZATION]

Findling and Porth had turned to Judaism and Jewish ritual for support in their grief but felt something was lacking. “There wasn’t really a way to kind of move through the experience from a Jewish perspective,” Findling said.

“It was around 2012, and one of the first meetings I had was with Abby and Debbie,” Kaufman said. “We walked around the infant section at Eternal Home and sat on the ground. We cried, we talked and recited the Kaddish together.

“Abby and Debbie’s goal was to have Sinai Memorial Chapel, which operates Eternal Home Cemetery, have a space for those who have experienced the grief of a miscarriage, stillbirth or death of a newborn,” she added. “At the time, I looked behind them and I saw the graves in the infant section. To the right of there was this undeveloped land. That would eventually become the memory garden.”

Sam Salkin, Sinai Memorial Chapel executive director, remembers those discussions being the start of a long process for getting the Memory Garden from vision to completion.

“They were having a conversation about the Jewish community and institutions and how there was not a lot of room in the communal landscape for terminated

pregnancies and stillbirths,” Salkin said. “There was a white space in the community. They wanted to create a place for this, a ‘makom’ – Hebrew for place.”

After years of red tape and other issues, the makom became a reality Nov. 13, 2022 with the dedication and opening of the Memory Garden, a space for those grieving from fertility and pregnancy losses.

The Sinai Memorial Chapel website describes it:

The Memory Garden – a sacred space for people to remember losses that are often not acknowledged or talked about.

These losses take place around the time of pregnancy: miscarriages, stillbirths, and the death of an infant. They are also losses felt by individuals struggling with infertility – with unfulfilled dreams of having children – and losses experienced by those who have chosen to end a pregnancy.

The garden fills a void in how Judaism traditionally responds to these losses and to our changing community needs. More people who experience these losses are talking openly about them. Many are seeking ways to end the isolation that can accompany such losses, and they are seeking solace and support from within the Jewish community.

The three-quarters of an acre site features a quiet, contemplative space, filled with native California trees, flowers and plants. A circle of redwood trees surround a private space for meditation or ceremonies, and a circle of water contains stones that visitors can rearrange, reflecting the tradition of placing a stone upon leaving a Jewish gravesite.

“I had a vision of what it might be,” Salkin said. “As we visited the site where it would eventually be built, we thought this could be amazing. The land was very scruffy, it wasn’t level. We knew having the Memory Garden there would be a great use of the land.”





THE WATER ELEMENT HAS TWO CONCENTRIC RINGS, ONE WITH THE HEBREW CALENDAR, AND ONE WITH THE SECULAR CALENDAR. THERE ARE STONES THAT CAN BE PLACED IN THE WATER TO SIGNIFY A DATE OF THE LOSS. (PHOTOS COURTESY OF SINAI MEMORIAL CHAPEL)

STARTING THE PROJECT

To get the ball rolling, Salkin put together what he called a “simple proposal” to the Sinai Memorial Chapel board of directors.

“It was the three-legged stool,” he said. “Debbie and Abby would be responsible for fundraising; Sinai would be responsible for donating the land and then the maintenance. There was a third institution that would be responsible for education and outreach.

“It took us about 10 years to raise the money, a little over \$1 million. The donors ranged from modest donations to very substantial ones. Every one of them mattered,” Salkin added. “The land, which is worth \$2 million, was donated by Sinai. It’s land that would have been used for cemetery business. It would have generated a profit. Our board members embraced the idea of doing this.”





THE WALKWAY LEADING TO THE MEMORY GARDEN AT ETERNAL HOME CEMETERY IN COLMA, CALIFORNIA. (PHOTOS COURTESY OF SINAI MEMORIAL CHAPEL)





**BROCHURES WERE GIVEN OUT AT THE MEMORY GARDEN
DEDICATION CEREMONY. (PHOTOS COURTESY OF SINAI MEMORIAL
CHAPEL)**

At the start, Kaufman was inspired by two poems – “Planting a Sequoia” by Dana Gioia and “The Round” by Stanley Kunitz.

“Rabbi Dorothy Richmond in San Francisco sent me the Sequoia poem,” she said. “The poem describes how the cold winds come over the Pacific, and there’s the sense of plantings and it situates a specific tragedy. Gioia refers to the customs of our fathers and he moves forward. There’s the ability to situate this grief in a very immediate and much larger concept.”

Kunitz was named the 10th poet laureate of the United States in the autumn of 2000 when he was 95.

“In his poem ‘The Round,’ he relates to what it is to get up every day and trudge to work. The demands of work and labor,” Kaufman said. “As a mourner to show up day after day, it’s a helpful poem. So immediate and physical.”

“Those two poems would be the anchor to the garden design,” she added. “I then had a set of six questions that I asked each architect who might be interested in constructing the garden.”

The questions were:

- 1. We hope the garden will elicit deeper experiences of empathy, connection, community, and participation. What are some examples of sacred architecture or sacred space that elicit these human experiences? Please tell us about one designed by your firm and one by another designer you admire.*
- 2. Please tell us about a design process that demonstrates a successful collaboration between you and a client, as well as a collaboration that wasn't so successful and what you learned from that process.*

3. *How do you feel about soliciting input from diverse voices, (i.e., art consultants, grieving parents, clergy)?*
4. *We'd like to have a clear understanding of the roles on the team. Who will be the primary, day-to-day contact? How do they think about process?*
5. *When you think about your projects that fall into the category of sacred landscape architecture or sacred architecture, where do you see something sacred or holy happening in the project? While I'm interested in what the forms or elements look like, I'm also interested in what the forms are doing.*
6. *The nature of pregnancy loss is inextricably linked to the body of the mourner which makes it different from all other losses. It is important to address the physicality of the mourner in this project. Could you please show us and talk about examples of your work that address the body?*



**THE MAIN ENTRANCE TO ETERNAL HOME CEMETERY. (PHOTOS
COURTESY OF SINAI MEMORIAL CHAPEL)**

The respondents were then narrowed to three firms.

“We had a bake-off with three of them around 2012. They did site visits,” Salkin said. “The firm we chose was MPA Design and Michael Painter. He did the redesign of the JFK gravesite at Arlington National Cemetery and was a very capable and prestigious landscape architect. He died in 2018.

“When he first saw the site, he designed it on the back of an envelope,” he added.

“What he designed and sketched then, and what we built, are almost identical.”

THE JOURNEY

Bureaucracy and the pandemic stretched out the time it took to finally complete the Memory Garden.

“We had a variety of complications. BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) goes underneath the edge of the site, and we had to deal with that right of way,” Salkin said. “In addition, we had three electrical poles that needed to be removed and put underground. There was a lot of complexity involved in coordinating institutions that were not used to collaborating with each other. Then COVID came.

“A project that we thought would be a much simpler process became much more complex than we imagined,” he added.

“But the founders were tenacious and, in that respect, there never was any doubt we could get it done.”

The finished project cost more than \$1 million, according to Salkin.

“In addition, it has a dedicated perpetual care fund to oversee any maintenance issues, and Sinai Memorial has agreed to take care of the day-to-day care as part of the cemetery’s budget,” he said. “Although it’s adjacent to the cemetery, there are no burials in the garden and never will be. It offers intimacy and seclusion. It’s a place for personal reflection; it’s ethereal.”

One of the highlights of the Memory Garden is the circle of water.

“The water element circulates in a complete circle,” Salkin said. “There are two concentric rings; the outer ring is the Hebrew calendar, and the inner ring is the secular calendar. There are a number of stones that can be placed in the water to signify a date of the loss. The very nature of putting that stone in the water changes the flow of the water.”

Almost a year since it opened, Kaufman takes great pride in what the Memory Garden offers.

"Now that the garden is there, I can't tell you how many people I have talked to, whether they are Jewish or not, who have heard about it," she said. "It's bittersweet. I wish no one had to go there.

"As a human, it reassures me," Kaufman added. "It helps me identify a need and that there is actually a place for someone to go. The garden gave a form to something hard to talk about, where language is inadequate. To be able to sit in this garden that is dedicated to this loss is important. I am so proud of what Abby and Debbie wanted to create and Sinai found a way to realize it. I am so pleased that it exists."