

K'vod v'Nichum

“Honor and Comfort”

Information on the Jewish approach to coping with death and helping those who are bereaved

Jewish burial and mourning practices are so wise, comforting, and psychologically sound that everyone can benefit from them, regardless of where they place themselves on the religious spectrum.

This booklet is prepared for those who are attending a Jewish funeral but who might not be familiar with traditional Jewish burial practices and the reasons for some of the traditions.

Two Basic Principles

WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO

The human emotional response to death is complex. The Jewish traditions in death and mourning take into account many different aspects, but there are two overriding principles that we will see again and again: ***k'vod hamet*** (respecting the honor of the deceased) and ***nichum avaylim*** (consoling the mourners).

K'VOD HAMET means that although we do not fantasize that the body of the deceased is the person anymore, it was the physical aspect of that person's being and personality. As such, it still deserves respect and care. It is not just a lump of lifeless matter to be treated casually or callously. It may be compared to a *Sefer Torah* (Torah scroll) which has become *pasul* (unusable). Because that scroll was holy, and still contains holy words, it is not tossed away or burned, but rather is reverently buried. The human body once had the holy spark of life in it, and as such deserves reverent treatment. We will see many aspects of this principle in the funeral rituals.

NICHUM AVAYLIM is one of those mitzvot "the fruits of which a person enjoys in this world, while the principal [reward] is reserved for him in the World-to-Come." (Shabbat 127a) This teaches the great merit of this mitzvah, for when we comfort mourners, we bring into this world some of the healing and harmony of the World to Come. *Nichum Avaylim* assumes that we can be of help to others and that mourners should not be alone with their grief, but should be supported by the concern and presence of their friends and the community. Some of the rituals of mourning are designed to bring people together for this purpose; others function to promote acknowledgement and acceptance of the reality of death.

Viddui / The Confession

A PRAYER TO SAY
WHEN DEATH MIGHT BE NEAR

The Jewish deathbed confessional prayer is called the *Viddui*. It is a personal prayer, not like the communal *Viddui* prayer recited by the whole congregation on Yom Kippur. The deathbed *Viddui* prayer acknowledges the imperfections of the dying person and seeks a final reconciliation with God.

The *Shulchan Arukh* assures us that reciting the *Viddui* will not 'tempt fate': "If you feel death approaching, recite the *Viddui*. Be reassured by those around you. Many have said the *Viddui* and not died, and many have not said the *Viddui* and have died. If you are unable to recite it aloud, say it in your heart. And if you are unable to recite it, others may recite it with you or for you."

Jewish tradition does not imply that the soul of the deceased is endangered in any way if the dying person does not speak the words of the *Viddui*, nor does a rabbi need to be present to say or hear the prayer.

The *Viddui* may be recited in Hebrew or in English. A translation by Rabbi Amy Eilberg can be found at

http://www.myjewishlearning.com/lifecycle/Death/Dying/Text_of_Viddui.htm

Upon Hearing the News

A PRAYER TO SAY
WHEN HEARING OF A DEATH

If one is present at the time of death or when one hears of a death, the following blessing is recited:

ברוך אתה ה' אלוהינו מלך העולם דיין הנמת
Barukh ata Adonai, Elohenu meleh ha-olam, dayan ha'emet
Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, the true Judge.

How remarkable that at a moment of grief, we recite a blessing! Furthermore, we recite it standing up. "The posture of accepting grief in Jewish life is always erect, symbolizing both strength in the face of crisis and respect for the deceased."¹ But how can someone calmly accept the death of a loved one, and even say a blessing over it?

This response helps us begin to answer the unanswerable. The words affirm one's awareness that God's governance of the universe includes both life and death; and that death is, in its own way, a manifestation of this governance.

¹ Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, p.44

Keriah / Rending the Garment

FOR THOSE FEELING TORN BY EMOTION, THERE IS A
SPECIFIC RITUAL

The ritual of *keriah*, or tearing the clothing, is probably the oldest mourning ritual we have, dating back to Biblical days. Traditionally the mourner's garment (i.e., a shirt, jacket, tie or scarf, etc.) is torn. Some people choose to tear a black ribbon. For a parent, *k'riah* is performed on the left side, closest to the heart, and for all other mourners, *k'riah* is performed on the right side. After we tear, we recite the blessing *Baruch atah Adonai, Elohaynu melech ha'olam dayan ha-emet*. "Praised are You, O Lord our God, the true Judge."

While the outward display of certain emotions is not fully accepted in our society, it is well known that mourners normally experience anger as a reaction to death. ... Studies have found that it is a great relief for the bereaved to have been able to express these feelings and to learn that it was neither uncommon nor uniquely wicked to have them. *Keriah* allows emotions which may border on frightening rage to be expressed as controlled, healthy anger.²

The torn garment is worn throughout *shiva* and may be worn throughout *sh'loshim*, the first thirty days after the funeral. However, it is not worn on Shabbat or holidays.

² Joel B. Wolowelsky, "Self-Confrontation and the Mourning Rituals," *Judaism*, Vol. 33, No.1 Winter 1984, P.109

Simple is Best

EQUALITY IN DEATH

The Jewish belief is that a funeral should be kept simple, without any display of wealth. This reflects the equality of all people, understood most clearly at the moment of death. Rabbi Jack Riemer tells the story from the Talmud:

Tanu Rabanan: The Sages have taught:

Barishona, originally,

They used to uncover the faces of the rich when they died...they had open caskets...because they looked well, and they would cover the faces of the poor when they died, because they looked ghastly, their faces were disfigured by starvation.

VIHAYU HA ANIYIM MITBAYSHIM...and the poor were embarrassed.

And so the Sages decreed that the faces of ALL people should be covered.

MIPNEY KIVODAM SHEL HA ANIYIM, out of respect for the dignity of the poor.

And then the Talmud says:

Barishona, originally,

The cost of burial was so great that families would run away and leave their dead in the street, because they could not afford the cost of a funeral...

AD SHEBA RABBAN GAMLIEL, VIHITKIN, until Rabban Gamliel came along and made a decree...

Raban Gamliel was one of the wealthiest people in the land... and yet he made a decree that when he died, he should be buried in a plain white robe, that has no pockets, because you can't take it with you, and in a plain pine box,

MIKNEY KIVODAM SHEL HA ANIYIM, out of respect for the feelings of the poor...

And that has been the Jewish way ever since! From Rabban Gamliel on, Jews are buried in a plain white robe, that has no pockets in it, and in a plain pine box, in order to remove the pressure to keep up with the Joneses and to have a fancy funeral... because ever since Rabban Gamliel, a fancy funeral is ILLEGAL in Judaism! Ever since Rabban Gamliel, what some undertakers do, when they try to persuade vulnerable people to buy fancy caskets and to dress the dead in tuxedos, and gowns, and to put rouge and cosmetics on their faces---has been forbidden by Jewish Law!³

So according to tradition, we dress the deceased in simple white garments, and burial takes place in a plain, unlined wooden *aron*, a coffin with no metal hinges, nails, or fasteners. As with many aspects of Jewish burial practice, the simplicity of the coffin speaks to the inherent equality of all in facing the stark reality of death.

³ Rabbi Jack Riemer, "The Meaning of Our Work" KAVOD V'NICHUM ADDRESS, Founding Conference, Rockville, MD. June 22-24, 2003. <http://www.jewish-funerals.org/conference/rockville/riemer.htm>

Taharah / The Preparation

RITUAL WASHING

We show regard for the deceased by respectful treatment of the *meit* (the body of the deceased). There is a special Jewish way of preparing the *meit* for burial: the *tahara*, or purification. "Just as a newborn child is immediately washed and enters this world clean and pure, so he who departs this world must be cleansed and made pure through the religious ritual called *taharah*."⁴ The *taharah*, performed by members of a Chevra Kadisha, is a gentle and respectful ritual honoring the *meit* as the miraculous vessel that housed the soul in life. Care is taken to preserve the dignity and modesty of the *meit*. In addition to washing, the *taharah* involves reciting prayers while pouring water in a continuous flow. This is reminiscent of the living waters of the *mikveh* (ritual bath) used by traditional Jews to honor occasions of transition.

⁴ Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, p. 6

Tachrichim / The Garments

DRESSING FOR THE FINAL YOM KIPPUR

There is a lovely and meaningful Jewish tradition to dress the deceased in simple white burial garments, called *tachrichim*. This reflects the equality of all people, understood most clearly at the moment of death, and the Jewish belief that a funeral should be kept simple, without any display of wealth.

Furthermore, the white linen garments remind us of the garments worn by the High Priest on Yom Kippur, when he would enter the Holy of Holies of the Temple to ask forgiveness for his sins and the sins of the Jewish people. "From this we gather that when one stands alone in confrontation with his Maker, he should be humble and contrite, wearing simple, white, unadorned linen garments." That is why many traditional Jews wear a white *kittel* -- sometimes the very garment in which they expect to be buried -- every year on Yom Kippur.⁵ Jewish men have traditionally been buried wrapped also in their tallit from which one fringe has been cut to render it *pasul*.

⁵ Abraham Chill, *The Minagim*, page 323e

Shmirah / Accompanying

PROVIDING GUARDIANS UNTIL BURIAL

We show regard for the deceased by respectful treatment of the body. It is a traditional Jewish practice that the deceased should not be left alone out of respect for the person that was. It also represents the notion that a Jewish funeral is a *l'vayah*, an accompanying, of the *meit* to the grave. We observe this law by having a *shomer*, or guardian, to be with the deceased at all times. Usually the *shomer* reads from the Book of Psalms while sitting with the *meit*. Volunteers who perform this service are sometimes family friends and relatives of the deceased who assist in performing the mitzvah of serving as *shomer* for part of the time between the death and the burial. Jewish community or volunteers fill in shifts as needed; in some cases the funeral home might assist by suggesting *shomrim* available for hire if volunteers cannot be found for all shifts.

Doing *shmirah* is not so much a matter of being “close to death”, but close to life, i.e., to eternal life. The body is dead but the *neshama* is still there; the body decomposes and decays but the *neshama* never does. Hence the need for *shmirah*: the *neshama* would feel intensely lonely and abandoned if we did not do this for the person after death. The *neshama* does not immediately leave the vicinity of the body—according to Jewish tradition—but remains nearby for the first three days or until burial.

Timely Burial

THE TIME BETWEEN DEATH AND THE FUNERAL: AS SHORT
AS POSSIBLE

The deceased is to be buried as soon as is possible, preferably within 24 hours of death; "...you must not let his corpse remain ...but must bury him the same day." (Deut 21:23) Prompt burial has psychological benefits, too. The funeral, the act of burial and the first recitation of *kaddish* which takes place by the grave are of great value in letting the survivors begin the mourning process. Long delays between death and burial put a great deal of strain on the mourners, leaving them in an emotional limbo. So every effort is made to expedite the funeral.

Since there are important benefits in prompt burial, then it can be a gift to your survivors if you, and your community, do some pre-planning that can help avoid delays.

However, we do not bury on Shabbat or festival days. Delays are also permitted in order to honor the dead, for example if we must wait for a proper coffin to arrive or for close relatives to come from out of town, or for legal reasons (such as a coroner-mandated autopsy). Even in the latter case, there may be ways to avoid undue delay. The Rabbi is ready to intervene in such circumstances.

Embalming and Viewing

WHY WE DON'T DO THESE

Dust to Dust: Jews return the entire body to the earth. This allows the body to decompose in the most natural way, fulfilling the insight “For dust you are and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19). We do not, therefore, embalm the dead. Also, embalming inevitably involves invasive procedures which violate the integrity of the corpse, treating it in a disrespectful manner, as if it were an object and manipulating it for cosmetic purposes. No state law requires embalming. The alternative of refrigeration is allowed if the funeral must be delayed.

Kavod Hamet: We do not open the coffin during the funeral out of respect for the deceased. It is seen as creating an unequal relationship, and therefore disrespectful, to look upon someone who cannot look back at you, treating the body as an object rather than as the vessel that held the person's soul. The emphasis during the service is on memories of the life of the deceased, not their appearance in death.

The Eulogy and Shiva

TALKING ABOUT THE DECEASED

The eulogy, or *hesped* as it is called in Hebrew, is a very important part of the funeral. "Eulogy" means "a good word," and that is what it is. It is not an attempt to write an entire biography of the person, but to convey some of the personality and accomplishments of the deceased. The eulogizer also tries to express the sense of loss experienced by the survivors. Sometimes an immediate family member or a friend will add remarks about the deceased or read an appropriate poem or letter.

In preparing the eulogy, most rabbis will spend time with the family, even if they were well acquainted with the deceased, talking about him/her. This is valuable not only for the writing of an appropriate eulogy, but for the mourners themselves. Often a grieving family, depressed and in shock, will become animated and even happy as they cast back their memories before the trials of illness and death, remembering incidents and anecdotes, realizing all the good memories of the deceased they will carry with them. In short, the eulogy interview can begin the process of adjustment to the new reality of loss with a therapeutic reminder of the love and recollection that will endure

Friends who make a *shiva* visit can help in the same way by encouraging the mourners to talk about the deceased, and by sharing memories that they have of them.

Burial in the Ground

WHY BURIAL AND NOT CREMATION

Jewish law and tradition is to be buried in the ground. Early in Genesis, Abraham buries Sarah. The other patriarchs and matriarchs are also buried. The words in Deut. 21:23 are "You shall surely bury him".

Many Jews ask if cremation is acceptable as an alternate to in-ground burial. Again, the answer is rooted in *K'vod v'Nichum* (Honor and Comfort). Cremation is usually done privately in a crematorium, with no witnesses or ceremony. After cremation the remaining bone fragments are crushed and put into a container to be given to the family. In contrast, in doing *tahara* (ritual washing) and *kevurah* (burial) a dead body is compared to a torah scroll that could no longer be used: still deserving of reverent respect. Comfort is offered to the bereaved by community involvement in preparations and burial. The rituals of *taharah*, *shmirah*, accompanying the deceased to the grave, saying prayers and eulogy, and the actual burial process provide grief-support for the bereaved family. *K'vurah* - filling in the grave can force us to confront the reality of death.

According to Maurice Lamm, "the heart-rending thud of earth on the casket is enormously beneficial. In proclaiming finality, it helps the mourner overcome the illusion that the relative still lives; it answers her disbelief that death has indeed claimed its victim; it quiets his lingering doubts that this may be only a bad dream."

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