

JEWISH FUNERAL, BURIAL AND MOURNING TRADITIONS

By Gail Rubin, www.AGoodGoodbye.com

Jewish ritual strives toward *kadosh*, or holiness. Ironically, that term also translates to “separateness.” Jewish observances are designed to show reverence for those who die, concern for the welfare of those who mourn, and reinforce the daily holiness of our actions. While other religious traditions also incorporate these strivings, Jewish practices are very different from Christian observances.

In morning prayers, Jews are reminded of these actions to help bring holiness into the world. Devout Jews recite daily this prayer from the *siddur* (prayer book), “These are the obligations without measure, whose reward too is without measure, in this world and in the world to come: To honor father and mother; to do deeds of loving kindness; to attend the house of study daily; to welcome the stranger; to visit the sick; to comfort the mourner; to rejoice with bride and groom; and to make peace when there is strife.” Instead of comforting the mourner, one translation of this prayer dictates “following the departed to their last home.”

Many Jews are surprised to learn there is a Jewish final confessional prayer that the dying may say, or someone may say on the person’s behalf. In Hebrew, it is called *Viddui*. One version in English, written by Rabbi Rami Shapiro, goes like this:

“I acknowledge before the source of all that life and death are not in my hands. Just as I did not choose to be born, so I do not choose to die. May it come to pass that I may be healed, but if death is my fate, then I accept it with dignity and the loving calm of one who knows the ways of all things.

May my death be honorable and my life be a healing memory for those who know me. May my loved ones think well of me and my memory bring them joy. From all I may have hurt, I ask forgiveness, upon all who have hurt me, I bestow forgiveness. As a wave returns to the ocean, so I return to the source from which I came.

Shema, Israel, Adonai Elohainu, Adonai Echad – Hear, oh Israel, that which we call God is oneness itself. Blessed is the way of God, the way of life and death, of coming and going, of meeting and loving, now and forever. As I am blessed with the one, so now I am blessed with the other. *Shalom, Shalom, Shalom.*”

(Usually translated as peace, *Shalom* can also mean fulfillment or wholeness and serves as a salutation for greeting or parting.)

JEWISH TREATMENT OF THE BODY

Jewish law calls for a burial to take place within 24 hours of a person’s death, unless there is a compelling reason for delay. This is based on two biblical commandments, both found in Deuteronomy 21:23: “Thou shalt bury him the same day,” and “His body shall not remain all night.” However, burials cannot take place on the Sabbath (Saturday) or a Jewish holiday.

A funeral can be delayed to accommodate the arrival of very close relatives, but never more than three days. Delaying burial is considered disrespectful to both the dead person and the family, who cannot mourn while their dead lie before them. It’s also considered disrespectful to put the body on display.

When I was a young adult, my Great Aunt Mary died at the age of 92. At the funeral home, my youngest brother Glen and I were alone in the room with her plain wooden coffin. Never having seen a dead body in person and not knowing much about Jewish funeral traditions, we were curious to see what Aunt Mary looked like before she was buried.

We cautiously lifted the lid and looked inside. Expecting to see her, we were surprised to see her tiny body encased in a zipped white cloth body bag. Her dignity was preserved, her body shielded from the eyes of her snooping great-niece and nephew.

The body of the deceased is treated with care and respect, extending dignity to the earthly vessel that the human spirit has left behind. This task is often undertaken by the local *Chevra Kadisha*, a volunteer organization that cares for the bodies of the dead

according to Jewish law and ancient custom. Funeral homes that conduct Jewish funerals can make arrangements for the services of the *Chevra Kadisha* or you can get information from your rabbi or local Jewish Federation.

Chevra Kadisha is a Hebrew phrase that means “sacred society” or “holy friends.” These anonymous volunteers are not paid for their services, for the act of caring for the dead is a *mitzvah* (a good deed and true act of loving kindness), because there can be no reciprocity from the deceased. They make sure the body is never left alone until burial and they prepare the body for burial through a process called *Tahara*, which means “purification.”

While there are local variations of this purification ceremony, it is customarily done on the day of the funeral. It may be done in advance if a body is flown from one location for burial in another place. In New Mexico, *Tahara* is available to any Jew, at no cost, in many locations around the state, not just in Albuquerque.

Usually a group of five or six people minister to the deceased, with one person reading prayers and psalms while the others tend to the body. In keeping with the spirit of modesty and respect for the dead, men perform the purification for men, women for women.

THE *TAHARA* RITUAL

First, the body is carefully washed with warm water, and all clothing, bandages and foreign objects are removed. Any hair or blood removed during cleansing is put in a bag to be placed in the coffin, to keep as much of the body intact as possible. During this cleansing, the modesty of the dead is maintained by keeping parts of the body not being worked on covered by a sheet.

After the body is washed, it is purified through a *mikvah*, a ritual bath that is utilized to mark Jewish life cycle events. Here though, water is poured onto the body from pitchers. The ritual dictates pouring nine *kavim* of water, the equivalent of about 24 quarts (*kavim* is the plural of *kav*, which is a little more than 2.5 quarts). Two people pour, while others hold a clean sheet like a *chuppah* (wedding canopy) over the body and the heads of those pouring. The body is then dried carefully and gently dressed in burial garments.

Burial garments are pure cotton or linen, reflecting the clothing of the High Priest as described in Exodus and Leviticus. Usually, the garments include an under-tunic, an over-tunic, a head covering, and pants with no opening for the feet, indicating this person will not be walking anywhere. The garments are white, a symbol of purity, and have no pockets, symbolizing that no material possessions can be taken into the afterlife, reaffirming “you can’t take it with you.” As the deceased is buried only in these garments, there’s no need to worry about selecting clothing or shoes.

The practice of burying all Jews in the same type of simple garments was instituted eighteen hundred years ago when Rabbi Gamaliel instructed that rich and poor are equal before God. We all have the same parent; we all come to the same end – dust to dust.

The *Chevra Kadisha* volunteers then move the body and place it in a plain wooden coffin with no metal parts. The coffin can be of any kind of wood, but inexpensive soft woods such as pine are preferred over hardwoods such as oak, because they decompose more rapidly. The body, the linen garments, and the wood all deteriorate at about the same rate.

Finally, potsherds, fragments of pottery, are placed over the eyes and mouth, as a sign that these eyes no longer see and the mouth no longer speaks. Earth from Israel is sprinkled over the body. There is a belief held by Orthodox Jews that when the Messiah appears there will be a resurrection of the dead and those who lived a pious life will roll underground to the Holy Land to be resurrected. The earth from Israel placed in the coffin prepares them for the trip. This ritual is often done even if the deceased was not Orthodox (just in case – you can never be too sure).

The Jewish approach toward burial is a total opposite of the American funeral industry’s approach of “preservation” through embalming and hermetically sealed metal caskets. Here a simple wooden coffin, sometimes with holes drilled in the bottom, helps hasten the biblical commandment “Unto dust shalt thou return” (Genesis 3:19).

Elisheva Levin, a member of Albuquerque’s *Chevrah Kadisha*, reflected on her participation saying, “Caring for the dead is, in a way the ultimate *mitzvah* because the dead have no voice. They cannot request this care nor can they thank the giver. I think

that the reward is an understanding of the preciousness of life, of the importance of each individual life and a sense of quietness about my own mortality.”

ON DONATION, CREMATION, EMBALMING

The ancient Rabbis considered any form of mutilation of the body to be irreverent; hence Jews have traditionally avoided tattooing, organ donation, autopsies and cremation. Orthodox Jews believe that “in the end of days” God will resurrect the dead, and any kind of bodily disfigurement will interfere with resurrection. Reform Judaism believes that the human body is made in the image of God, so desecration of the body is offensive and to be avoided.

However, a rabbinical ruling in the eighteenth century suggested autopsy could assist learning and help lead to the preservation of life, a paramount virtue. And a later ruling regarding the life-affirming virtue of organ donation has made both autopsy and organ donation theoretically acceptable to most non-Orthodox Jews.

My brother Mitch, always one to be different, has said he wants to be cremated when he dies. Cremation presents a special challenge to Jews. While the idea is to return to dust, burial in the earth is a key component of the process. Cremated remains, called “cremains,” don’t have to be buried – they may be scattered on water or over earth, kept in an urn on someone’s shelf or in a closet, or installed in a crypt or mausoleum.

The Orthodox believe if the body was destroyed by fire, there will be no body to resurrect come the “end of days.” Cremation also brings to mind the horror of the Holocaust in Nazi Germany. However, recognizing that cremation is a growing trend in modern funerals and that having a grave to visit is an important aspect to mourning and recovery, some Reform Jewish cemeteries now offer mini-plots for burial of cremains.

Embalming is forbidden in Jewish law for several reasons. Blood is drained from the body and discarded in embalming, a problem since Jewish law considers blood a part of the body, and therefore not to be removed from the deceased.

Embalming also retards swift decomposition of the body, delaying its return to the earth. It represents a denial of death through efforts to preserve the body. Even though the embalming of Jacob and Joseph was mentioned in the Bible, it was an Egyptian custom

that predated the establishment of many Jewish laws that were given to the people by Moses.

JEWISH FUNERAL AND BURIAL CUSTOMS

In ancient times, a family was responsible for burying their own deceased, and burial involved an earthly grave or a tomb. In Jesus' time, bodies would be stored in tombs until the flesh deteriorated to the skeleton, then the bones transferred and stored in an ossuary, which is an urn or box. How times have changed!

Today's families are no longer personally responsible for preparing and burying the body; instead they pay a funeral home to undertake those services. This is how the term "undertaker" originated. Funerals can be held at the funeral home's chapel, in the synagogue, or at graveside. In the past, funerals have been held at the family's home, but that is rarely done now.

Jewish tradition favors modesty and simplicity in its treatment of the dead, and ostentatious funerals are frowned upon. The thought is it's better to give money to charity than to flaunt it at a funeral. Charitable contributions are preferred over floral tributes. The body is never put on display for people to view, as this is seen as disrespectful of the deceased and the earthly vessel that once held their spirit.

KERIA AND FUNERAL ELEMENTS

At the funeral, the focus shifts from the care of the body of the deceased to the care of the mourners. Before a funeral starts, the close family of the deceased – parent, spouse, child, brother, sister – perform *keria*, a ritual tearing of garments. The custom originated in the Biblical account of Jacob tearing his garment when told by his sons that a wild beast killed Joseph. Today, we're a little more practical. Rather than ruin an otherwise good article of clothing, mourners pin a torn black ribbon onto their clothing.

"A funeral is about embracing hard reality while finding comfort in tradition, in community, and in the celebration of life," said Rabbi Joseph Black, former rabbi of Congregation Albert in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Jewish funerals are generally short, simple affairs with three main elements: a eulogy that says truthful, good things about the deceased, the *El Malei Rachamim*, a

prayer for the deceased, and the Mourner's *Kaddish*, an ancient prayer in praise of God. However, the Mourner's *Kaddish* is not said until the deceased is buried, so if it's not a graveside funeral, this prayer will not be said until such time as the body is actually placed in the ground.

To create a eulogy, Bruce Kahn, retired rabbi of Temple Shalom in Chevy Chase, Maryland, said he would sit down with the family and discuss the person's life in great detail for several hours, to truly know the person. Often things would come out that most family members didn't know – both strengths and weaknesses.

A no-holds-barred discussion is a cathartic experience for the mourners, and it enabled Rabbi Kahn to be accurate in the eulogy. He would censor the material, though, saying, "I know enough to say the right things," adding, "Every eulogy I've given, the families ask for copies."

The mourners follow the hearse in a procession as the body is transported to the cemetery. Burial in a Jewish cemetery is preferred, so the body may rest with its ancestors. Once the casket is positioned in the grave, all adults in attendance recite the Mourner's *Kaddish*. A quorum of ten adults, called a *minyan*, must be present at the funeral in order for the prayer to be recited. The *Kaddish* is an ancient Aramaic poem that is an expression of faith, reinforcing that the mourner still believes in God and that life is worth living.

After the recitation, the mourners take turns shoveling some earth into the grave. The cemetery may provide hand trowels for this ritual. The mourners are not expected to actually fill the grave. The sound of the earth landing on the casket provides another reminder of the hard reality of the loved one's death.

A memorial marker is not installed until later. Usually, an unveiling of the marker is held near the first anniversary of the person's death, but the time frame for an unveiling can range from six to 18 months after the burial. (More about the unveiling ceremony to come.)

When leaving the cemetery, or before entering the home of the mourners after the funeral, visitors will often find a pitcher of water with which to wash their hands. This custom has both ritual and practical roots. It is connected with the ancient practice of purification through washing after being in close proximity to the dead. Practically

speaking, had the family actually buried a loved one themselves (instead of relied on cemetery personnel), they would want to wash their hands before leaving the cemetery.

SHIVA

After the funeral, the immediate family returns home to a “Meal of Condolence” prepared by neighbors and friends. How often when we hear the news of a death, the first impulse is to prepare food to take to the mourners’ home. This custom of preparing a meal for others is a very old tradition, for both Jews and Christians, to show concern for their neighbor’s grief.

At this stressful time, it’s helpful to have one family member serve as coordinator for placement and use of food prepared by others. It’s not unusual for a family to order platters for the meal after the funeral and save the donated casseroles for consumption later in the week of mourning.

A weeklong period of mourning, known as *Shiva*, which means seven in Hebrew, begins the day of the funeral. During this first and most intense stage of mourning, the immediate family does not leave the house or go about their usual business. Traditionalists don’t bathe or shave. Prayer services are held in the home every day, traditionally three times a day, but nowadays more likely once or twice at most.

The *Shiva* period can be shortened to three days if full observance would seriously impact the mourner’s livelihood. The seven-day period was established based on an interpretation of a verse in Amos (8:10) that references festivals and mourning in the same sentence (the festivals Passover and Sukkot last seven days). In addition, Genesis (50:10) indicates that Joseph mourned his father Jacob for seven days.

SHIVA TRADITIONS

Traditionally, mourners sit on low stools or boxes, as opposed to ordinary chairs. Some scholars suggest this ancient custom was based on the description of Job, who when suffering his misfortunes, was comforted by friends who sat with him on the ground.

Sitting low to the ground symbolizes a mourner’s awareness that life is not the same and demonstrates a desire to stay close to the earth in which his or her loved one is

now buried. Paying a condolence visit during this week is considered an act of compassion, but one should refrain from customary cheery greetings and allow the mourner to speak first.

Mirrors are often covered in a house of mourning for several reasons. Mirrors are associated with vanity, and during a period of mourning it is not appropriate to be concerned with one's personal appearance. Also, with prayer services taking place in the home, it is forbidden to pray in front of a mirror, which can pull one's concentration away from praying. Additionally, Jews believe humans are created in the image of God, and to see oneself as a grieving mourner in a sorry state is not a compliment to God.

A memorial candle that burns for seven days is lit in the house of mourning. It looks similar to the pillar candles in glass tubes that Catholics use, and is usually plain or adorned with a six-pointed Jewish star. In Jewish tradition, the candle is symbolic of the body and soul. The flame is the soul, which reaches ever upward. By lighting a candle and keeping it burning, it is believed that the soul of the departed is aided in its heavenward journey.

POST-SHIVA TRADITIONS

After the initial seven-day period, mourners can return to ordinary activities. During the thirty-day period that starts at the funeral, called *Sheloshim*, mourners are supposed to recite the Mourner's *Kaddish* daily for the deceased. Jews who are members of a congregation will hear a list of names that includes the name of their loved one announced prior to the recitation of this prayer during Sabbath services.

After a year, Jews who wish to honor the memory of the deceased mark each anniversary of the death by lighting a *Yahrzeit* candle and saying the Mourner's *Kaddish* at synagogue. The practice of observing the anniversary of a death is many centuries old, but the word *Yahrzeit* was not used before the 16th century. The term is derived from the German word *Jahrzeit*, used in the Christian Church to denote the occasion for honoring the memory of the dead.

The *Yahrzeit* candle is lit after sunset the evening before the anniversary date, and then burns for a full 24 hours. While not required, putting a picture of the deceased next to the candle helps kindle memories.

JEWISH HEADSTONE UNVEILING CEREMONY

One of the most popular posts on The Family Plot blog describes what happens during a Jewish headstone unveiling ceremony. This post describes the ceremony that took place for the unveiling of my father-in-law's marker.

Our rabbi and cantor presided over the brief but moving ceremony. The rabbi noted that Judaism is a religion that sanctifies time, but not so much place. There is of course the revered Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, the remnant of the ancient Temple, but outside of that, there aren't many places that are held sacred, save for the resting places of our loved ones.

The rabbi noted that Jacob marked Rachel's grave with a stone, beginning a tradition that continues to this day. Our consecration of the headstone brings together time and space, marking our love for those who have passed on with a memorial to last over the years.

The cantor sang the 23rd Psalm in Hebrew, and *El Malei Rachamim*, God of Mercy, a prayer that asks God to gather up the soul of the deceased. Here's a translation of the prayer, taken from *Kol Haneshama*:

God filled with mercy,
dwelling in the heavens' heights,
bring proper rest
beneath the wings of your *Shehinah*,
amid the ranks of the holy and the pure,
illuminating like the brilliance of the skies
the souls of our beloved and our blameless
who went to their eternal place of rest.
May you who are the source of mercy
shelter them beneath your wings eternally,
and bind their souls among the living,
that they may rest in peace.
And let us say: Amen

The rabbi also read Ecclesiastes, which provides words to reflect on the meaning of our lives. The most famous passages 3:1-8, focuses on a time for every purpose under heaven:

To everything there is a season,
a time for every purpose under the sun.
A time to be born and a time to die;
a time to plant and a time to pluck up that which is planted;
a time to kill and a time to heal ...

a time to weep and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn and a time to dance ...
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to lose and a time to seek;
a time to rend and a time to sew;
a time to keep silent and a time to speak;
a time to love and a time to hate;
a time for war and a time for peace.

The rabbi left out the last two lines, and said that this was both a time to keep silent and to speak. He invited us to share stories about the departed, which we did, with laughter and tears. After we said the Mourner's Kaddish, we each placed a red rose on the headstone, my father-in-law's favorite flower, and a small stone to indicate we had visited.

If you want to learn further customs and additional reasons for Jewish traditions, you may wish to refer to *The Jewish Book of Why* and *The Second Jewish Book of Why* by Alfred J. Kolatch.

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