

Jewish Mourning & Funeral Customs

A time of grief is a time of intense emotions. It is a time when the support of rituals and community customs are not only welcome but cherished. Temple Sinai offers this booklet in the hope of enlightening all in our community to the comfort and healing provided by Jewish tradition.

Jewish Rituals and Customs

Jewish rituals and customs for death and mourning are guided by two basic principles: respecting the dead and comforting the mourners. Respect for the dead (*kevod ha-met*) is expressed by caring for the body which is viewed as the soul's vessel, watching over it and returning it to the earth in a pure and natural state. Comforting the mourner (*nichum avelim*) means both encouraging the bereaved to take the time and space to confront their loss head-on and leading them back into the world of the living in a step-by-step process.

While the idea of handling the body as little as possible is important, the *mitzvah* (commandment) of "saving a soul" (*pikuah hanefesh*) is considered paramount so that nearly all Jewish authorities support organ donation and permit autopsy in the service of medical research.

Judaism mandates that the body be treated with awe and reverence. Embalming or viewing the body is usually not permitted to avoid relating to the body as an object, instead of a holy vessel. The body is cared for tenderly; washed, wrapped in plain cotton or linen shrouds, and buried in an unadorned wooden casket. The simplicity of shrouds and caskets emphasize the equality of all and protect the poor from embarrassment.

According to Jewish custom, the body is buried quickly; within twenty-four hours if possible. This is both a token of respect and a way of caring for the mourners' feelings, since the hard work of grief does not begin until after the funeral.

Jewish funerals are simple; flowers and music are considered too festive. The funeral service focuses on the loss of a unique soul and thus the core of the service is the eulogy.

In contrast to some other traditions, the Jewish funeral liturgy does not speak of death as a "better place." While there is no one single Jewish view of the afterlife (Jews have embraced beliefs that range from simple decomposition to reincarnation, from elaborate depictions of heaven and hell to humanistic metaphors about the tangible legacy of good works) the liturgy makes no mention of the afterlife, or of a reunion with God or with family members who have passed away.

Perhaps the most powerful commandment of the Jewish funeral comes after the casket is lowered and family members and friends shovel the first clods of earth onto it. That singular sound communicates the undeniable reality of death. Painful as it is to the bereaved, it helps the healing work of grief to begin.

Comforting the Bereaved

From the moment the funeral ends, the tradition focuses on taking care of the mourning family. Intimate family members: spouses, siblings, children and parents, are required to "sit shiva." (Other family members may choose to do so as well). *Shiva* (from the Hebrew number seven) is a seven day time of withdrawal from the world to face the range of emotions that follow a loss: fear, anger, sorrow, terror, emptiness, even relief. During these days, mourners are exempt from all the requirements of daily life and restricted from its pleasures so that they can do the hard work of grieving. (Shabbat, Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot cannot be days of shiva). The bereaved are taken care of by family and friends who provide food and company to listen to memories, look at old photos and to make up the minyan (prayer quorum of ten adults) that recites the *Kaddish* prayer daily.

Traditionally, mourners recite or "say *Kaddish*" for their loved ones daily during the first month (*shloshim*). Children are required to say *Kaddish* for parents for a full year; bereaved spouses, siblings, and parents often do so as well.

The Mourner's *Kaddish*, a prayer recited at Jewish worship services, is a litany of praise for God and does not mention death or mourning, yet its singular rhythm and rhyme has become firmly associated with loss for all Jews.

The fact that *Kaddish* must be said in a *minyan* (prayer quorum of ten adults) is a powerful element in the Jewish approach to death. Community support is fundamental to the Jewish response to bereavement. The tradition seems to know that, without the support of others, the burden is often too heavy for the mourner to bear. Mourners who might otherwise withdraw from the world are required to become part of a group, which invariably includes other mourners who can provide companionship and understanding.

Mourning and Burial in Interfaith Families

(A Reform Jewish perspective)

Question #1 - May a Gentile be buried in a Jewish cemetery? May a Jew be buried in a Christian cemetery?

It is accepted practice to bury a gentile spouse in a Jewish cemetery. The opinion of Reform thinkers is that the entire cemetery is not consecrated ground, but rather only the individual grave where a body rests is sacred. The Talmud or body of texts that comprises Jewish law, (Gittin 61a) states that for the sake of peaceful relations, we may bury the gentile dead. Thus, Reform practice has been to permit Gentile spouse or partner to be buried in Jewish cemeteries provided there are no symbols of another faith on the person's grave marker. Generally, clergy of other faiths are not permitted to officiate at the interment in a Jewish cemetery.

The concept of a Jewish cemetery is an extension of Jewish communal identity and cohesion. It is, therefore, desirable for Jews to be buried in a Jewish cemetery. Yet, when a Jew is buried in a secular or Gentile cemetery, a rabbi may officiate.

If a partner or spouse is a practicing member of another faith, a clergyman of that faith officiates at the church or funeral home. If the interment for the deceased is to be in a Jewish cemetery following the funeral, a rabbi officiates at the graveside. If a partner or spouse has been part of Jewish family and communal life, but has never converted, a rabbi may officiate at the funeral and at the interment.

Question #2 - May Jews observe Jewish mourning rituals for relatives who were not Jewish?

Jewish mourning rituals are observed for a deceased spouse, parent, sibling or child of every religion. These practices are for the support of the living and to help them express their grief over their loss. All born Jews and Jews by Choice honor the memory of their family in the same ways.

Question #3 - May Jews participate in funerals of other faiths? May Gentiles participate in Jewish funerals?

Jews mourning relatives and friends may attend funeral services held in a church or funeral chapel, serve as pall bearers and eulogize. At a Roman Catholic mass, Jews do not participate in receiving communion or kneel during the service.

Conclusion

In Jewish tradition, burial of the dead is sometimes referred to as *Hesed shel emet*, true loving kindness. What we do for the dead is the most sincere and selfless act of caring we can perform, since the dead do not repay us. Burying our Gentile relatives and expressing our grief through Jewish mourning practice is no less of an effort of true loving kindness.

The whole range of Jewish mourning customs is open to anyone in mourning. For example: Jews-by-choice say *Kaddish* for their parents; the death of a non-Jewish friend may prompt the wearing of a torn ribbon (*keriah*) that denotes a mourner; and anyone can light a *yahrzeit* (memorial) candle on the anniversary of a death. And of course, any synagogue member can request bereavement counseling from his or her rabbi, regardless of the deceased's religion-- or his/her own.

Sources:

"Jewish Burial and Mourning Practice for Non-Jewish Relatives" by Rabbi Paul J. Citrin

"Judaism on Interfaith Mourning Issues" by Rabbi Carl Perkins,

These articles and others are available at www.interfaithfamily.org.

See also Building the Faith: A Book of Inclusion for Dual Faith Families, Federation of Jewish Men's clubs, www.fjmc.org

What is Outreach? And what is **Project Welcome**?

Outreach is a Jewish community effort to welcome and include those seeking a stronger connection to Judaism: Jews-by-Choice, interfaith couples and families, parents of interfaith married children, and everyone interested in knowing more about Judaism.

Outreach does not seek to convert non-Jewish individuals. Rather, it enables them to explore, study, and come to understand Judaism, in an atmosphere of support so that a comfortable relationship with Judaism can be fostered.

Project Welcome is an outreach program welcoming interfaith families, unaffiliated Jews and seekers into Independent, Renewal, Reconstructionist, Reform and Conservative synagogues.

Project Welcome offers a new "gift" like this one each month.

CLICK ON THE GIFT at www.ProjectWelcome.org



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