

Jewish Funeral Traditions

Throughout the centuries, Jewish people have practiced time-honored traditions that keep families and generations connected, and death is no exception. When a Jewish person dies, the body is thought to be as sacred as a Torah scroll and, therefore, must be handled with the respect shown to a Torah. Thus, Jewish funeral practices have traditionally followed a strong set of customs and beliefs based on the Torah.

From the moment of death until approximately a year after the burial, specific measures must be taken that require families and/or friends to insure the deceased is cared for, buried and honored as a Jew. While some traditions vary according to an individual's level of faith, traditional Jewish funerals are very simple and usually relatively brief.

As a sign of respect, the deceased is never left alone from the time of death until the burial itself. A *Shomer* (guardian or keeper) sits with the body and is forbidden to eat, drink or perform a commandment in the presence of the dead. To do so would be considered mocking the deceased, because he/she can no longer do these things. The *shomer* continuously recites passages from the Book of Psalms, even throughout the night.

The *Chevra Kadisha*, a Jewish sacred society, is a group of devout men and women who have taken on the obligation of ritually preparing the deceased. They perform the *Taharah*, the purification – or washing – of the body, which is then dressed in *Tachrichim*, traditional burial shrouds. Usually made of pure white linen, it symbolizes equality in death, for this simple, pocketless garment is physical proof that the deceased is taking nothing with him/her when they leave this world. G-d will judge them based on their merits and deeds and not the material wealth they may have accumulated over their lifetime.

Jewish law prohibits the use of any materials that are not completely degradable in the construction of a burial casket. This is because unnatural materials will prevent the body from returning to the Earth as quickly as possible.

Jewish funeral customs focus on respecting and protecting the feelings of the deceased. Therefore, viewing the body is considered disrespectful of the dead and the casket [Oron] is not opened during a funeral service. Most traditional funerals do not have flowers, as this is considered an unnecessary and frivolous adornment. However, most Rabbis will not object if a family wishes to place a floral arrangement atop the casket.

The funeral service consists of the recitation of Psalms, Scripture readings and a eulogy. Either prior to or just following the service, mourners (Judaism defines a mourner as one who enjoyed one of the primary relationships with the deceased, such as a parent, child, sibling or spouse) then perform the ritual of *K'riah*, or the rending of the garment, an ancient custom that is symbolic of the tear that exists in the mourner's heart. Traditionally clothing is torn, but many people today use a black ribbon attached to the outside of the clothing. When others see a ribbon or a tear in clothing, it is a sign that the person is in mourning. If a person is grieving the death of a parent, the ribbon is worn or clothing torn on the left side. All other relatives wear theirs on the right side to acknowledge that the relationship with a parent is different and, therefore, observe that difference by placing it closer to or further away from one's heart. The ribbon, or torn clothing, is worn traditionally for seven days, except on *Shabbat*, the seventh day of the Jewish week and the Jewish day of rest. However, when mourning the death of a parent, the ribbon or torn clothing is traditionally worn for thirty days.

The deceased is accompanied to their final resting place where the *Kaddish* – or mourners' prayer – is recited after the casket has been lowered and the grave filled. *Chesed Shel Emet* is shown to the deceased when mourners and friends participate in the actual burial by placing a few shovels of earth onto the casket or vault. This is something the deceased cannot do for himself. The deceased cannot ask mourners to do it and since the deceased cannot repay – or even simply thank – mourners for seeing to his or her proper Jewish burial, *Chesed Shel Emet* becomes the ultimate, unselfish act of love and kindness.

After the burial and upon leaving the grave, it is traditional for those in attendance who are not mourners to form a *Shura*, a double line facing each other to form a pathway through which the mourners pass. Jewish tradition teaches that words of consolation are not offered to mourners until after the burial as this provides the first opportunity to express the traditional words of

comfort, "*May you be comforted among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.*" Perhaps there is no more appropriate Hebrew expression to define this tradition, which simply says, "*Words from the heart go directly to the heart.*"

After death, Jews believe the soul of the person known and loved continues to be aware of all that transpires in others' lives, and continues to be the recipient of the love and positive actions carried out on his or her behalf. Death is not viewed as a tragedy, even when it occurs early in life or through unfortunate circumstances, but as a natural process of life. The extensive mourning rituals in Judaism do not reject or protest death, but rather place great value on life in general and the life of each person as an individual.