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Jewish Mourning Customs: An Overview



From
The Jewish Way in
Death and Mourning
by Rabbi Dr. Maurice Lamm



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parents. This merit is achieved, primarily, by living on a high ethical and moral plane, by being responsive to the demands of God and sensitive to the needs of one’s fellow man. The formal expression of this merit is accomplished by prayer to God and by contributions to charity.

The Yizkor prayer is recited in the synagogue on the following four major Jewish Holidays; Yom Kippur, and the last day of Passover, Sukkot/Festivals of Booths and Shavuot/ Pentecost.

Yahrzeit: Memorial Anniversary

Despite the Germanic origin of the word *yahrzeit*, the designation of a special day and special observances to commemorate the anniversary of the death of parents was already discussed in the Talmud. This religious commemoration is recorded not as a fiat, but as a description of an instinctive sentiment of sadness, an annual rehearsing of tragedy, which impels one to avoid eating meat and drinking wine – symbols of festivity and joy, the very stuff of life.

Yahrzeit may be observed for any relative or friend, but it is meant primarily for parents. It is customary to light a 24-hour candle on the day of the *yahrzeit*.

THE JEWISH WAY OF DEATH

Death is the crisis of life. How a man handles death indicates a great deal about how he approaches life. As there is a Jewish way of life, there is a Jewish way of death.

As the Jewish way of life implies a distinctive outlook and a unique life-style based on very specific views of God and the place of man in society and the universe, so does the Jewish way of death imply singular attitudes toward God and nature, and toward the problem of good and evil; and it proffers a distinctive way of demonstrating specific Jewish qualities of reverence for man and respect for the dead.

For example, the prohibition of both cremation (the unnaturally speedy disposal of the dead) and embalming (the unnatural preservation of the dead), bespeaks a philosophy of man and his relationship to God and nature. Repugnance for the mutilation of a body expresses a reverence for man, because he was created in God's image. The ban on necromancy is founded on very precise theological concepts of creature and Creator. Likewise, the commandment to bury the dead without delay draws a very fine, but clear line between reverence for the dead and worship of the dead. The profound psychological insights implicit in the highly structured Jewish mourning observances speak eloquently of Judaism's concern for the psychological integrity of the human personality.

PREPARATION OF THE REMAINS: TAHARAH

"As he came, so shall he go," says Ecclesiastes. 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*, purification.

The *taharah* is performed by the *Chevra Kadisha* (the Holy Society, i.e. the Burial Society), consisting of Jews who are knowledgeable in the area of traditional duties, and can display proper respect for the deceased. Men perform the *tahara* for a man and women for a woman. In addition to the physical cleansing and preparation of the body for burial, they also recite the required prayers asking Almighty God for forgiveness for any sins

JOYOUS OCASIONS DURING MOURNING

The observance that most affects the daily life of the mourner during the twelve-month period is the complete abstention from parties and festivities, both public and private. Participation in these gatherings is simple not consonant with the depression and contrition that the mourner experiences. It borders on the absurd for the mourner to dance gleefully while his parent lies dead in a fresh grave. Thus, the Sages decreed that, while complete physical withdrawal from normal activities of society lasts only one week, withdrawal from joyous, social occasion lasts thirty days in mourning for other relatives, and one year (twelve Hebrew months) in mourning for one's parents. Joy, in terms of the mourning tradition, is associated largely with public, social events rather than with personal satisfactions.

THE UNVEILING; WHAT IS IT?

The service of commemoration, or unveiling, is a formal dedication of the cemetery monument. It is customary to hold the unveiling within the first year after death. It should be held at anytime between the end of shivah and the first *yahrzeit*.

YIZKOR: RECALLING THE DEAD

Recalling the deceased during a synagogue service is not merely a convenient form of emotional release, but an act of solemn piety and an expression of profound respect. The *yizkor* memorial service was instituted so that the Jew may pay homage to his forebears and recall the good life and traditional goals.

This memorial service is founded on a vital principle of Jewish life, one that motivates and animates the *Kaddish* recitation. It is based on the firm belief that the living, by acts of piety and goodness, can redeem the dead. The son can bring honor to the father. The "merit of the children" can reflect the value of the

the deceased may have committed, and praying that the All-merciful may guard him and grant him eternal peace.

Jewish tradition recognizes the democracy of death. It therefore demands that all Jews, be buried in the same type of garment, shrouds that are called *tachrichim*. Wealthy or poor, all are equal before God, and that which determines their reward is not what they wear, but what they are. Nineteen hundred years ago, Rabbi Gamliel instituted this practice so that the poor would not be shamed and the wealthy would not vie with each other in displaying the costliness of their burial clothes.

The clothes to be worn should be appropriate for one who is shortly to stand in judgment before God Almighty, Master of the universe and creator of man. Therefore, they should be simple, handmade, perfectly clean, and white. These shrouds symbolize purity, simplicity, and dignity.

THE CASKET

“For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (genesis3:19) is the guiding principle in regard to the selection of caskets.

...The coffin must be made completely of wood. The Bible tells us that Adam and Eve hid among the trees in the garden of Eden when they heard the Divine judgment for committing the first sin. “Said Rabbi Levi: “This was a sign for their descendants that, when they die and are prepared to receive their reward, they should be placed in coffins made of wood.”

FLOWERS

In ancient days, the Talmud informs us, fragrant flowers and spices were used at funerals to offset the odor of the decaying body. Today, this is no longer essential and they should not be used at Jewish funerals at all. In our days, they are used primarily at Christian funerals, and are considered to be a non-Jewish ritual custom which should be discouraged. It is much better to honor the deceased by making a contribution to a synagogue, hospital, hospice or to a medical research association for the disease which

COMFORTING THE BEREAVED

A sacred obligation devolves upon every Jew to comfort the mourners, whether he is related to them or not, and whether he was a close friend or a passing acquaintance. In Judaism, exercising compassion by paying a condolence call is a mitzvah, considered by some of our greatest scholars to be biblically ordained... It is a person’s duty to imitate God: as God comforts the bereaved, so man must do likewise....

The fundamental purpose of the condolence call during shivah is to relieve the mourner of the intolerable burden of intense loneliness. At no other time is a human being more in need of such comradeship. Avelut means withdrawal, the personal and physical retreat from social commerce and concern for others. It is the loss that he alone has suffered.

KADDISH; WHEN IS IT SAID?

The Kaddish is recited at every service, morning and evening, Shabbat and holiday, on days of fasting and rejoicing.

The period that mourners recite the Kaddish for parents is, theoretically, a full calendar year. The deceased is considered to be under Divine judgment for that period. Some communities, therefore, adhere to the custom that Kaddish be recited for twelve months in all cases. However, because the full year is considered to be the duration of Judgment for the wicked, and we presume that our parents do not fall into that category, the practice in most communities is to recite Kaddish for only eleven months – even on leap years, which last thirteen months, the Kaddish is recited for only eleven months. We subtract one day, so that we terminate the Kaddish in time to allow a full thirty days before the end of the twelve-month period.

The Kaddish is to be recited only in the presence of a duly-constituted quorum which consists of ten males (including mourners) above the age of Bar Mitzvah. If there are only nine adults and one minor present, it is still not considered a quorum for a minyan.

leave the house after shivah and to slowly rejoin society, always recognizing that enough time has not yet elapsed to assume full, normal social relations. Shaving and haircutting for mourners are still generally prohibited, as is cutting the nails, and washing the body all at once for delight (as opposed to washing for cleanliness that is required).

The fifth and last stage is the twelve-month period (which includes the sheloshim) during which time things return to normal, and business once again becomes routine, but the inner feelings of the mourner are still wounded by the rupture of his relationship with a parent. The pursuit of entertainment and amusement are curtailed. At the close of this stage, the twelve-month period, the bereaved is not expected to continue his mourning, except for brief moments when *yizkor* and *yahrzeit* is observed. In fact, our tradition rebukes a man for mourning more than this prescribed period.

The effect of shivah and sheloshim is on a biological, pre-rational level. The mourner generally has not yet physically disassociated from the deceased; mourning is all sentiment and therefore the religious practices deal with skin and water, nails and hair. Emerging from the sheloshim, properly observed, is to emerge from the maelstrom of emotions brought on by the death.

The year-long observances, however, are on a strictly rational plane – the avoidance of joyous situations is a formal rejection of fun for fun's sake in recognition of the loss, and the recitation of Kaddish is a strictly community-oriented declaration in the form of a prose-poem, mystically-based, but intellectually articulated.

In this magnificently conceived, graduated process of mourning, an ancient faith raises up the mourner from the abyss of despair to the undulating hills and valleys of normal daily life.

WHO IS THE MOURNER & WHO IS THE MOURNED?

Who is the mourner? Jewish law formally considers the bereaved to be those who have lost any one of the seven close relatives listed in Leviticus 21:1:3: father, mother, wife (or husband), son, daughter, (married or unmarried), brother, and sister (or half-brother or half-sister).

afflicted the deceased. This method of tribute is more lasting and meaningful.

TIMING THE FUNERAL SERVICE

The Bible, in its mature wisdom, required burial to take place as soon as possible following death.

The religious concept underlying this law is that man, made in the image of God, should be accorded the deepest respect. It is considered a matter of great shame and discourtesy to leave the deceased unburied – his soul has returned to God, but his body is left to linger in the land of the living.

THE NIGHT BEFORE THE FUNERAL SERVICE

The “wake” is definitely alien to Jewish custom, and its spirit does violence to Jewish sensitivity and tradition. The custom of visiting the funeral parlor on the night before internment to comfort the mourners and to view the remains is clearly a Christian religious practice, and not merely an American folkway. If the convert finds that not visiting the night before will be an affront, he or she should make a token appearance. Nonetheless, the convert should understand that, in Judaism, the place for offering condolences is at home, during the seven special days of mourning called *shivah*.

RENDING THE GARMENT: KERIAH

The most striking Jewish expression of grief is the rending of the outer garments by the mourner prior to the funeral service

WHO MUST REND THEIR CLOTHING?

1. Seven relatives are obligated to perform this command: son, daughter; father, mother; brother, sister; and spouse.
2. They must be adults, above the age of thirteen. Minors who are in fact capable of understanding the situation, and appreciating the loss, should have other relatives or friends make the tear for them.
3. Divorced mates may cut their clothing, but they are not obligated to do so.

THE FUNERAL SERVICE

The funeral service is a brief and simple service designed primarily... for the honor and dignity of the deceased.

The service consists of a selection from the Psalms appropriate to the life of the deceased, a panegyric of his finer qualities which his survivors should seek to implant in their own lives, and a memorial Prayer asking that God shelter his soul "on the wings of His Divine presence."

THE INTERMENT

Jewish law is unequivocal in establishing absolutely, and uncompromisingly, that the dead must be buried in the earth. Man's body returns to the earth as it was. The soul rises to God, but the physical shelter, the chemical elements that clothed the soul, sink into the vast reservoir of nature.

CREMATION

Cremation is never permitted. The deceased must be interred, bodily, into the earth. It is forbidden - in every and any circumstance - to reduce the dead to ash in a crematorium. It is an offensive act, for it does violence to the spirit and letter of Jewish law, which never, in the long past, sanctioned the ancient pagan practice of burning on the pyre. The Jewish abhorrence of cremation has already been noticed by Tacitus, the ancient historian, who remarked upon what appeared to be a distinguishing characteristic that Jews buried, rather than burned, their dead.

THE MOURNING PATTERN

There is no legal obligation upon a person who had converted to Judaism to mourn his non-Jewish parents in the prescribed Jewish manner, but it is expected that the convert will show utmost respect for his natural parents. The grief that the convert expresses, although technically not required by Jewish law, should possess a markedly Jewish character. Therefore, it is important to know about these laws.

Judaism, with its long history of dealing with the soul of man, its intimate knowledge of man's achievements and foibles, his grandeur and his weaknesses, has wisely devised graduated periods during which the mourner may express his grief, and release with calculated regularity the built-up tensions caused by bereavement. The Jewish religion provides a beautifully structured approach to mourning.

FIVE STAGES OF MOURNING

The first period is that between death and burial (*anninut*), at which time despair is most intense. Not only the social amenities, but even major positive religious requirements, were canceled in recognition of the mourner's troubled mind.

The second stage consists of the first three days following burial, days devoted to weeping and lamentation. During this time, the mourner does not even respond to greetings, and remains in his home (except under certain special circumstances). It is a time when even visiting the mourner is usually somewhat discouraged, for it is too early to comfort the mourners when the wound is so fresh.

Third, is the period of *shivah*, the seven days following burial. (This longer period includes the first three days.) During this time, the mourner emerges from the state of intense grief to a new state of mind in which he is prepared to talk about his loss and to accept comfort from friends and neighbors. The world now enlarges for the mourner. While he remains in the house, expressing his grief through the observances of *avelut* - the wearing of the rent garment, the sitting on the low stool, the wearing of slippers, the refraining from shaving and grooming, the recital of the Kaddish - his acquaintances come to his home to express sympathy in his distress. The inner freezing that came with the death of his relative now begins to thaw. The isolation from the world of people and the retreat inward now relaxes somewhat, and normalcy begins to return.

Fourth is the stage of *sheloshim*, the thirty days following burial (which includes the *shivah*). The mourner is encouraged to