

JEWISH MOURNING TRADITIONS

Shmira / The Vigil (From Chevra Kadisha)

When a person dies, the soul or *neshama* hovers around the body. This *neshama* is the essence of the person, the consciousness and totality, the thoughts, deeds, experiences and relationships. The body was its container and the *neshama*, now on the way to the Eternal World, refuses to leave until the body is buried. In effect, the totality of the person who died continues to exist for a while in the vicinity of the body. Jewish mourning ritual is therefore most concerned with the feelings of the deceased, not only the feelings of the mourners. How we treat the body and how we behave around the body must reflect how we would act around the very person himself.

IMMEDIATELY AFTER DEATH

Jacob is promised that when he dies, "Joseph's hand shall close your eyes." (Genesis 46:4).

The 16th century "Code of Jewish Law" dictated that the eyes should be closed, arms and hands extended and brought close to the body and the lower jaw closed and bound. The body was placed on the floor, with the feet towards the door. The body was covered with a sheet and a lit candle placed near the head. The Midrash states that on Shabbat one does not close the eyes, bind the jaw or light a candle.

- Some Jewish communities would place potsherds on the eyes; Russians placed coins. Ancient superstitions in many cultures held that if the eyes were opened, the ghost of the deceased would return to fetch away another of the household.
- The body was placed on the floor, sometimes on a bed of straw, 20 minutes to an hour after death.
- Many communities believed (and still do) that a body must be taken out feet first. If they are taken out head first, this allows them to "look" back into the home and beckon someone else to join them in death.

WATCHING THE BODY

The deceased is not left alone until burial. There was a wide-spread belief in the Middle Ages that at the moment of death a struggle occurs between angels and demons, each seeking to control the deceased's soul. Jews believed that the demons are denied access to the dying if someone stands guard over them.

- The Talmud postulates that the body was watched to protect it from rodents and similar marauders.
- In the Middle Ages, Polish Kabbalist Isaiah Horowitz wrote, "I have received a tradition that those who watch the corpse from the moment of death until it is covered with earth should gather around it so closely that not a breath of 'outside air' [otherwise known as a demon] can seep past their guard; they should constantly repeat this prayer without an instant's pause, even a thousand times." The prayer in question was an acrostic of the 42-letter name of God, based on gematria patterns of 7.
- Another late medieval custom was to march 7 times around the corpse reciting "certain Biblical selections which drive away the spirits so that they may not seize the body."

SIDE NOTE: The number 7 is one of the most important numbers in gematria, the alpha-numeric Hebrew code that gives meaning (or superstition?) to various patterns. For example, we use *Chai* = 18 as a kind of "lucky number." The number 7 is the general symbol for all association with God, the favorite religious number of Judaism, typifying the covenant of holiness and sanctification, and also all that was holy and sanctifying in purpose. It refers to the Divine number of completion (The Seventh Day, Shabbat), as well as a covenant promise (in Hebrew, the expression שבעה "*shava*" literally translates as "to seven oneself," meaning "to swear a covenant").

ANNOUNCING THE DEATH

References to pouring out water at the time of death are found in 13th century German and French sources, and many countries had some version of water pouring at the time of death. It was thought that if anyone said the word "death" Satan would find out and be tempted to take the soul of the deceased. If one silently poured out water, then Satan wouldn't hear of the death. Families kept jugs of *mayim she'uvim* (drawn water) at the entrances to homes and this water was used to announce the death. Some sources say that all of the water in the house was poured out (this

being a time without plumbing, so water would have been held in vessels). The water was also considered to be tainted by the nearby death, and unsuitable to be used. It was commonly believed in the Middle Ages that water on the ground would keep the ghost of the recently departed at bay so that it would not attack relatives of the deceased.

The Kolbo (14th-15th century law codes) offers these explanations:

- It is objectionable to communicate bad news directly, and water is poured out so passers-by will know that a death took place.
- The Angel of Death cleanses his dripping knife in water after it has been steeped in gall, and all water is poured away so he can't dip his bloodstained weapon into a vessel, thereby scattering death abroad.
- The "Jewish Quarterly" from 1894 quotes a James Frazer ("a recognized authority on such matters"), who thought the practice was traced to a fear that the ghost would fall in and be drowned (and therefore not able to go to his final resting place).

Some Orthodox do still observe water traditions:

- Water that is found in any utensil in the building when the death occurred should be spilled out, unless it was brought in after the death occurred. For example, if you had a cup of water present in the building at the time of the death you would throw that water out. Seltzer, soda, soup, tea do not need to be spilled.
- Spilling the water out also applies to the two buildings nearest to the building in which the person died, unless a public road or street comes between the buildings.
- Water is not poured out on Shabbat or Yom Tov.
- There are 2 reasons for throwing out the water: (1) the angel of death drops a drop of "blood of death" into the water, and (2) people will realize that someone died and will therefore act appropriately.

KERIA

When he thought that Joseph had been killed, "Ya'akov tore his robes in grief and put on sackcloth." (Genesis 37:34)

Keria is the ritual of rending the clothes, *Keria* meaning "tearing." The Talmud prescribed that everyone who witnessed a death must rend a garment immediately. In time, this requirement was modified to apply to only close relatives, and the time frame was relaxed as well. Many contemporary Jews wait until they are able to change into appropriate clothing and some perform Keria at the funeral home. Most Sephardim wait until after the burial to rend their garments.

Keria is performed after the *Da'Yan Ha'Emet* blessing is recited: "*Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha-olam, Da'Yan Ha'Emet, "who is a righteous judge."* This affirms that God is not held responsible for the misfortune and that the mourner accepts his lot as part of the natural order of the world. Or more traditionally, that we affirm our belief that everything God does is true and fair, though at the moment we cannot understand it.

Some scholars believe that the ritual of Keria was introduced as a substitute for the pagan practices of gashing one's flesh and shaving off one's hair. In the mid-19th century, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, the leader of American Reform Judaism, discouraged the rite of rending as a sign of mourning, although this custom has now returned. Many reform and other liberal Jews pin a cut black ribbon to their garments instead of rending them.

ORTHODOX PRACTICE

- Rending of garments must be performed while standing to show respect for the deceased (Samuel II 13:31): "and the king stood up and tore his clothes." One who was sitting or leaning on something while rending the garments must rend again, but this time without reciting the blessing.
- When mourning for parents, the tear is made in public by hand on the front left side over the heart. The usual practice is that someone else starts the cut with a knife and then the mourner tears the garments by hand, making the tear one *tefach* (handbreadth) long in order to bare the heart. The tear should be made in the fabric of the cloth, vertically along the length of the garment from the neck downwards. The mourners are required to rend garments which are worn indoors: a suit jacket, a vest, a sweater, a blouse or shirt. Pajamas, underwear and overcoats are not torn. The mourners do not have to rend their entire wardrobe or their best, most expensive garments, but only the clothing they will wear until the end of Shiva (the 7-day grieving period). Wearing a black ribbon or tearing it as a sign of mourning cannot substitute for rending of garments.

- For parents, the mourners must rend all the outer garments they are wearing at the moment. A man will first tear his outermost garment such as a jacket or sweater, and then proceed to his shirt. For reasons of modesty, a woman tears the innermost garment first, such as her blouse, pins-up or covers the tear and then proceeds to tear the outer garment. If the garments are changed during the Shiva period, the new garments must be rent as well, except for garments worn on Shabbat.
- For any of the other closest relatives (brother, sister, son, daughter or spouse) the tear is made either by hand, with a knife or with scissors on the RIGHT side and may be done privately. The mourners' clothing may be rent by another person. Only one outermost garment is torn and if the garments are changed during the Shiva period, the mourner is not obligated to rend these new garments.
- It is written in the Book of Ecclesiastes 3:7, "A time to rend and a time to mend." After Shiva, mourners are not required to wear torn garments. The tear may be crudely mended right after Shiva and professionally mended after *Sheloshim* (the 30-day mourning period), unless the garment was torn for parents. In this latter case the tear may never be mended professionally, but only crudely and only after Sheloshim. Some people discard their torn garments after Shiva.
- If the news of the death of a close relative comes within thirty days from the burial, one is obligated to rend his or her garments. After thirty days, one is obligated to rend his or her garments for parents, but not for other closes relatives.
- Keria may not be done on Shabbat or Yom Tov, and is postponed until the next day.

BURIAL

Decent burial was regarded to be of great importance in ancient Israel, as one can measure by the frequency with which the Bible refers to the fear of being left unburied. It was regarded as one of the laws of humanity "not to let anyone lie unburied." The one thing expressed most clearly by Israelite burial practices was the human desire to maintain some contact with the community even after death, through burial in one's native land, and if possible with one's ancestors. Jacob's request, "Bury me with my fathers" (Gen. 49:29), was the wish of every ancient Israelite. In harmony with this desire, the tomb most typical of the Israelite period was a natural cave or a chamber cut into soft rock, near the city. Bodies would be laid on rock shelves provided on three sides of the chamber, or on the floor, and as generations of the same family used the tomb, skeletons and grave goods might be heaped up along the sides or put into a side chamber to make room for new burials. This practice of family burial was common enough to give rise to the Hebrew expressions "to sleep with one's fathers" (I Kings 11:23) and "to be gathered to one's kin" (Gen. 25:8) as synonyms for "to die."

There is no explicit biblical evidence as to how soon after death burial took place, but it is likely that it was ordinarily within a day. This was dictated by the climate and by the fact that the Israelites did not embalm the dead. Cremation was not practiced by the ancient Israelites. In Talmudic times, burial took place in caves, hewn tombs, sarcophagi and catacombs; and a secondary burial, a re-interment (*likkut azamot*) of the remains in an ossuary, sometimes took place about one year after the original burial. (An ossuary is a chest, box, building, well or site made to serve as the final resting place of human skeletal remains. A body is first buried in a temporary grave, then after some years the skeletal remains are removed and placed in an ossuary.)

Jewish custom insists on prompt burial as a matter of respect for the dead. According to one Kabbalistic source, burial refreshes the soul of the deceased, and only after burial will it be admitted to God's presence. The precedents set by the prompt burials of Sarah (Gen. 23) and of Rachel (Gen. 35:19) are reinforced by the Torah's express command that even the body of a man who had been hanged shall not remain upon the tree all night, but "thou shalt surely bury him the same day" (Deut. 21:23). Some delays in burial are justified: "Honor of the dead" demands that the proper preparation for a coffin and shrouds be made, and that relatives and friends pay their last respects.

Funerals may not take place on Shabbat or Yom Kippur; and although the rabbis at one time permitted funerals on the first day of a festival, some modern communities prefer postponement. Where there are two interments at the same time, respect demands that the burial of a scholar precedes that of an *am ha-arez* ("average citizen"), and that of a woman always precedes that of a man. The duty of burial, although primarily an obligation incumbent on the heirs, ultimately rests with the whole community. In Talmudic times, communal fraternal societies for the burial of the dead evolved out of an appreciation of this duty. This *Chevra Kadisha* still plays a vital role in Jewish communities.

During our early history, the dead were buried in street clothes so that with the coming of the Messiah, the departed would be ready for resurrection. In early Talmudic times, it was customary to bury wealthy people in their costliest garments, a practice that was discontinued sometime around the 1st century CE. Additionally, in post-Talmudic times the concept of resurrection and the afterlife became increasingly popular among Jews, and it was believed that by wearing loose, unknotted garments, one would be better prepared for what came next. It is not until the 17th century that we see references to dressing the dead in shrouds.

Tachrichim / The Shroud – Dressing for the final Yom Kippur (from Chevra Kadisha)

<<Every Jew is buried exactly alike, in a handmade, simple, white linen shroud which includes a white linen hat, shirt, pants that cover the feet, coat and belt. The shrouds have no pockets to accentuate the fact that no worldly belongings accompany the deceased. In Orthodox tradition, men are dressed in a *tallit* (prayer shawl). Today's consensus is that if one traditionally prayed wearing a tallit during one's lifetime, then one should be buried in the tallit, male or female. When the burial occurs, one corner of the tallit is removed and is placed on the *met/meta* (deceased), so as to render the tallit no longer kosher.

"For dust you are and to dust you shall return." The casket must not be made of a material that slows down the body's natural return to the elements. Wood is the only material allowed and several holes are opened at the bottom to hasten the body's return to the earth. When vaults are required, they too should be open at the bottom. The *neshama's* return to heaven is dependent upon the body's return to the ground. The process of decay in the grave was believed to be painful to the body, and therefore to be the means of atonement. Jewish Law is therefore concerned with the immediacy of burial and the natural decomposition of the body. Burial is directly in the ground, with family members and friends helping to fill the grave completely until a mound is formed. Caskets remain closed because viewing the body is seen as disrespectful and undignified.>>

Burial traditions regarding the coffin have changed over the centuries, and have varied from country to country. Burial without a coffin is still practiced by many Orthodox Jews in Israel and other areas, but is illegal in most Western countries.

In rabbinic times, funeral processions were led by lamenting female mourners, often professionals. The Mishnah quotes Rabbi Judah as ruling that "even the poorest in Israel should hire not less than two flutes and one wailing woman" for his wife's funeral. Women also composed elegies that were chanted aloud, as evidenced by the Talmud's inclusion of eight elegies attributed to the women of Shoken-Zeb in Babylon. Prohibitions against women's voices being heard in public were relaxed for funerary rituals.

Many of the customs and ceremonies around the burial service were associated with ancient superstitions. Foremost is the recitation of Psalm 91, *Yoshev b'seter Elyon*. This lyric poem came to be known as the Anti-demonic Psalm and is recited as the coffin is carried from hearse to grave. It was believed that the recitation of Psalm 91 could counteract the evil intentions of demons that are unusually active at the time of burial. During the procession, when Verse 11 is recited ("For He will order His angels to guard you wherever you go"), seven stops are made. Explanations for the stops include hesitance to leave the deceased, or the seven times the word "vanity" is found in the Book of Ecclesiastes, or the seven stages of life. But modern scholars generally think that the origin of this stopping and starting was the belief that it would cause the evil spirits following the dead to become confused, disoriented and uncertain about the whereabouts of the deceased. In the 9th century, the *Goan Sar Shalom* explained that the processions paused in order to shake off evil spirits that clung to those who attended a funeral. With each stop, one spirit would disappear. Scholars in subsequent centuries, such as Rashi, noted that with each pause the evil spirits lose their effectiveness. Some scholars would recite the Anti-demonic Psalm before an afternoon nap, just in case.

Other demon-avoidance tactics at funerals included the two rows of comforters (*shurah*) that the mourners walked through after burial (this protected the mourners from attack by demons who lurk in the cemetery), tossing a clump of grass over one's shoulder as one leaves the burial (originally coupled with sitting down seven times on the way out, because evil spirits follow mourners and flee when they are stationary), and hand-washing after leaving the grave (to remove the spirit of uncleanness that dwells in the cemetery because of the demons there). Sephardic communities originally excluded women from funerals, as they felt that women attracted more demons. The Talmud recounts that

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi was warned by the Angel of Death never to stand near women returning from a funeral “because I go before them dancing with sword in hand, and with permission to kill.”

SHIVA

Shiva is the 7-day period following burial, during which time family members follow specific mourning customs. In ancient times, the period of mourning began when the mouth of the burial cave was covered with a rock. In modern times, the day of the burial is the first day of Shiva. There is a concession to reduce the time period to 3 days if one’s livelihood will suffer, and contemporary Jews often hold a shorter Shiva.

Traditional observances include:

- Mourners sit on low stools or chairs.
- Mourners don’t wear shoes inside the house, but may wear slippers.
- Mourners usually don’t leave the house, and if they must leave, they should do so after dark. If they leave the house (to go to services, for instance), they often put dirt in their shoes to remind them of their status.
- The first meal eaten by mourners in a Shiva house should be prepared and served by neighbors or friends.
- A memorial candle or lamp is lit and kept burning throughout the 7-day Shiva period.
- Mourners’ Kaddish is recited, either at services or at a Shiva minyan in the home.
- Entertainment and social activity are shunned.
- One does not shave, cut hair, trim fingernails, wear jewelry (except wedding bands) or use cosmetics, oils or lotions. Luxurious bathing or showering is forbidden.
- Changing clothing is not done, except for undergarments.
- Kissing, embracing and sexual activity are not allowed.

COVERING MIRRORS

It is a contemporary practice, rather than an ancient tradition, to cover all the mirrors in the house where the deceased is lying, and to keep mirrors covered through Shiva. There are several explanations given for this, including:

- One should not be overly involved in their own vanity during moments of tragedy, and it is disrespectful to the deceased to be involved in one’s own beauty and ornamentation at a time when their body is decaying.
- Prayer services, such as a Shiva minyan, are held in the home and it is forbidden to pray in front of a mirror.
- There was a primitive belief that the soul was reflected in the mirror, and the ghost of the deceased would be able to see the soul and snatch it away.

SHELOSHIM (30) and beyond

Mourning for all relatives except parents continues for 3 weeks after Shiva, until thirty days have passed from burial.

Mourning for parents, *Yud Bet Chodesh*, lasts for 12 months. Kaddish is recited during both of these time periods.

Sheloshim customs:

- Mourners should not attend festive or joyous social functions, nor attend or watch entertaining programs, dance or listen to joyous music.
- A mourner MAY lead the synagogue service.
- Festivals (Pesach, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot) cancel Sheloshim observance.
- Some congregations suggest that mourners take a different seat at services. Some say that it should be 6 feet from the usual seat; others say it’s fine to be just one seat away. Those mourning parents often change seats for the full year of mourning.
- Luxurious bathing is prohibited, as is cutting nails with clippers or scissors (although one may bite them!).
- Traditionally, those mourning a parent did not shave or cut their hair “until such time as they are criticized for being unkempt.” Similarly, mourners did not buy new clothes, or even change their clothes or launder what they were wearing until the advent of a major festival (which might take up to 6 months) or until they were reprimanded for being slovenly. Later Rabbis relaxed these restrictions, allowing the mourner to wear new clothing if it is first worn by someone else.

- Unmarried women may not use eye shadow, face make-up and other cosmetics during Sheloshim, but married women may use cosmetics of all kinds after Shiva, *because one can't expect a husband to have to see his wife looking unattractive for an entire month.*

THE AFTERLIFE – an overview

- The view held by ancient Jews (as well as Greeks and Babylonians) was that all people, Jews and gentiles, go to a netherworld called *She'ol*, a deep and dark place in which shadowy spirits called *refa'im* dwell.
- During the 2nd century BCE, a new apocalyptic eschatology took form: that the dead would rise at the End of Days. After the Babylonian Exile (638-586 BCE), Judaism became deeply concerned with interpreting sacred texts and deciphering their secrets. There was also the arrival of a new kind of Jewish hero during the Maccabean Revolt (167-160 BCE) – the martyr. A benevolent God must repay the sacrifice of a person who died for the sanctity of his name, and while we all die, death is only temporary, and in the future all will receive their just rewards.
- In the 1st century CE, the Sadducees, the prominent priestly class who ran the Temple, did not believe in an afterlife, nor in the resurrection of the dead. Their counterparts and adversaries, the Pharisees, elite experts in Jewish law, believed in both. Once the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, the Sadducees and their theology were lost, and the Pharisees and their conception of the afterlife became mainstream rabbinical Judaism.
- Also at this time concepts of heaven, called *Gan Eden* (the Garden of Eden), and *Gehinom* (Hell) appear. Early Christianity started to splinter from rabbinic Judaism, and Jewish concepts of the afterlife found their way into Christianity. In the Talmud we are told that all but the most wicked are sent to *Gehinom* (a fiery place), but their stay in the flames is temporary. After being purged of their sins, they are ushered to Heaven by Abraham. Elsewhere, the torments of Hell are said to be temporary for most sinners – but instead of ending in Heaven, they end in nonexistence. Some references to the World to Come in the Talmud seem to refer to *Gan Eden*; others clearly refer to a time after the dead come back to life: “In the World to Come there is no eating, or drinking nor procreation or commerce, nor jealousy, or enmity, or rivalry – but the righteous sit with crowns on their head and enjoy the radiance of the Divine Presence.”
- Descriptions of Heaven and Hell fell out of favor in the Middle Ages, as Jewish scholars became enamored of both Plato and Aristotle. Rabbi Saadia Gaon (882-942 CE) proclaimed that upon death, a man's soul is released from the body and is stored, along with all other souls. In the future, the Messiah will come and God will sit in judgment of the souls. The virtuous will be reunited with their bodies and live eternal lives in the World to Come (a world much like this one, only better). The wicked will be sent to *She'ol*.
- Maimonides (1135-1204) wrote an Aristotelian version of Jewish philosophy, in which the soul is a form of the intelligence of God. In the World to Come, “our souls will be informed by the knowledge of the Creator, in the manner in which the heavenly bodies are informed of Him, or even more.” Thus according to Maimonides, after death the righteous partake in the divine intelligence, while the wicked cease to exist.
- A book entitled “*Sefer HaBahir*” was responsible in the Middle Ages for introducing the Eastern notion of reincarnation into Jewish thought: it would become incorporated into later Jewish mystical thought, known as Kabbalah. The Zohar, a mystical Jewish text written by Moses de Leon (1250-1305), explains that a person has 3 souls: *Nefesh*, *Ruach* and *Neshama*. Each soul takes over a specific role in the journey after death – *Nefesh* lingers around the body until it is reincarnated into another body; *Ruach* goes to the 7-tiered *Gehinom* and then ascends through the tiers to *Gan Eden* (unless the person was very wicked); *Neshama* immediately goes to the Garden of Eden.
- Beginning in Talmudic times, many Rabbis believed that resurrection of the dead would take place only in the Holy Land. Others disagreed, saying that those in the Diaspora would not be denied resurrection. They believed that the bodies of the pious dead buried outside of Israel would roll underground through tunnels burrowed by God, *gilgul mechilot* (“rolling through underground passages”). When the bodies arrive in Israel they will be reunited with their souls. Some cemeteries bury the dead with their feet facing Israel, to assist with which direction to roll, or because some dead will walk to Israel when the Messiah comes.
- In current times there isn't much agreement regarding the afterlife. There are different theories regarding just how many tiers Heaven and Hell have, who goes to hell and for how long, how reincarnation fits in, etc. Many Jews have forsaken belief in the afterlife altogether, or are agnostic about its form. Yet others profess faith in this or that theory from the list with the fervor and certainty of true believers. You choose.