



MATTERS OF LIFE AND DEATH

Every culture has its own peculiar practices with regard to proper attention to the body of the deceased and conduct of mourners. These practices reflect deeply held views of the nature of man, the attributes of God, the structure of society, and the quality of afterlife.

The practices of Judaism in this regard manifest the conviction that man is made in the image of God and his body, therefore—even in death—must be treated with dignity and respect. In addition, there is recognition of equality of all men in the sight of God ("The rich and poor meet together [in the grave]; the Lord is the maker of them all." Proverbs 22:2), and the ultimate goodness of God.

Following Are Seven Distinctively Jewish Customs Relating to the Passing of A Loved One:

1. Bodies are not embalmed. Blood is considered part of the person's body and it is therefore viewed as disrespectful to remove the blood in the embalming process. Also, any procedure designed to preserve the body would seem to contradict God's directive in Genesis 3:19, "...for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." In

the absence of embalming, burial is usually within 24 hours of death and never more than 72 hours, even in the most extenuating circumstances. There is no viewing of the body prior to burial since this would be considered disrespectful to the deceased.

2. Bodies are dressed in a burial shroud consisting of seven separate garments made of very simple, inexpensive material like cotton or linen, a reminder of the equality in death of both rich and poor.

3. Caskets are not used in Israel. Elsewhere, where local law may require a casket for burial, construction is of common soft wood, like pine, with no ornamentation or metal parts. This, too, is viewed as indicative of the absence of any priority of position among the deceased ("...for there is no iniquity with the Lord our God, nor respect of persons. . ." 2 Chronicles 19:7) and a soft wood box will quickly "return to dust."

4. A marker is not usually placed on the grave for the first year and family members and friends do not visit the gravesite for the first year. After a year has elapsed the marker is erected and there is often an unveiling ceremony held when the cloth is removed to reveal the words inscribed on the stone.

Thereafter it is common for anyone visiting the grave to leave a small stone or pebble on top of the marker as an indication of remembrance of the deceased and a record of the visit. This practice was dramatically demonstrated in the closing scene from the film, *Schindler's List*.

5. Family and friends gather in the home for a seven-day mourning period following the death. (“...and he [Joseph] made a mourning for his father seven days.” Genesis 50:10) During this time they are seated on low stools or hassocks. (“So they sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spoke a word unto him; for they saw that his grief was very great.” Job 2:13) This practice is known as “Sitting Shiva” from the Hebrew word, *shiva*, meaning “seven.” It is considered proper etiquette for those outside the immediate family to wait until the third day after the death to visit the home and spend time there “Sitting Shiva.” This practice is an excellent opportunity for Christian friends to express condolence and demonstrate genuine love and concern.

During this mourning period the mirrors in the home are covered as an expression of disregard for attention to personal appearance at a time when the sense of loss should be uppermost in the minds of all.

6. A special prayer is recited regularly in the synagogue for eleven months following the death of a parent or close relative.

This prayer is called the Kaddish (from the opening words, “Glorified and sanctified [verb *kaddish*] be God’s great Name. . .”). The following graphic shows the two words under the picture of the man praying the Kaddish, “glorified” and “sanctified.” The prayer makes no reference to death or mourning, but rather is an acknowledgment of God’s goodness and greatness through all of life’s circumstances, reminiscent of Job’s words, “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him. . .” (Job 13:15)



7. The anniversary of the death of a loved one (called the Yahrzeit) is commemorated with the lighting of a candle which burns for 24 hours. It is the practice of some to fast for this period of time and to visit the grave. It is also common for a light to be lit in the synagogue in honor and memory of a loved one whenever the Memorial Prayer (called the Yizkor) is prayed, including services for Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot.

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