

**Between This World and the Next:
Jewish Wisdom on Death and Mourning**

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Session 1 - Accompanying the Dying, Caring for the Deceased, and Burial

The TVO Bereavement Support Committee has created two excellent guides for learning about Jewish mourning practice and local resources available to mourners.

Jewish Practices and Rituals for Death and Mourning: A Guide

LOCAL RESOURCES WHEN A LOVED ONE DIES

The Bereavement Support Committee invited me to teach on the layers of learning and ritual our ancestors bequeathed to us to guide us in death and mourning. In our study and discussion together, I will bring the holy texts of our tradition and community and refer to the TVO guides. I invite all those present to bring your stories, experiences, and questions.

1. Accompanying the dying

Bikur cholim is the mitzvah to visit and care for the sick and dying to ease their passage from earth into the eternal life of heaven.

Midrash: Shabbat 12b:3

The Divine Presence is above the head of the sick person, as it is stated: “God will support him on the bed of illness,” and he must treat the Divine Presence with deference. On a similar note, Rava said that Ravin said: From where is it derived that the Holy One, Blessed be He, feeds the sick person during his illness? As it is stated: “God will support him on the bed of illness.”

What does it mean to envision the presence of God sitting at the head of the sick or dying person as we visit?

i) Visitors take their cues from the person who is dying re what to discuss. Some say not to discuss funeral arrangements in front of dying as we are not to "hasten death" others say that the dying are permitted to pray for their own death as an ease to suffering, as are loved ones

Praying for Healing into Death -- TALMUD, TRACTATE KETUBOT 104A

A story about the death of Rabbi Judah HaNasi. Rabbi Judah was suffering from a severe and painful stomach disease. His devoted students and colleagues decreed a public fast and offered prayers for heavenly mercy. Furthermore, they announced that whoever said that Rabbi Judah was dead would be stabbed with a sword. The Rabbi's handmaid ascended the roof and prayed: The immortal beings in heaven desire Rabbi to join them, and the mortals desire Rabbi to remain with them. May it be the will of God that the mortals may overpower the immortals.

When, however, she saw how often Rabbi Judah resorted to the privy, painfully taking off his tefillin and putting them on again each time, she prayed: May it be the will of the Almighty that the immortals may overpower the mortals. Watching the rabbis incessantly continuing their prayers for heavenly Mercy, she took up an earthenware jar and threw it down from the roof to the ground. For a moment they ceased praying, and the soul of Rabbi Judah departed to its eternal rest.

While it is forbidden to "hasten death," Jewish authorities throughout the centuries have agreed that it is permissible to remove "impediments" that prolong dying... any questions or thoughts?

ii) As end of life approaches, if the patient is conscious, it is customary to offer a VIDUI, a confessional prayer that allows the individual the opportunity to express regret, confess sins and ask for forgiveness and to recite the SHEMA. Rabbi, friend or family can recite *vidui* for the dying and many modern versions exists.

Traditional Vidui - I acknowledge before You, Adonai, my God and God of my ancestors, that my recovery and my death are in Your hands. May it be Your will to heal me completely. And if I die, may my passing be an atonement for all the sins that I have committed, and grant me my portion in Gan Eden, and allow me to merit the World to Come, which has been reserved for the righteous.

Modern Vidui

TVO Jewish Practice and Rituals for Death and Mourning Guide, pages 23-25

What is the real work of death? Forgiveness? Connection? Legacy? Individuals experience a wide spectrum of emotions, such as shock, sadness, anger, guilt, relief, and even numbness. How do we support healing when faced with death?

Is the Shema a form of acceptance, a drawing nearer to God?

Reciting the Shema before dying – Talmud, Berachot 61b

We learned in our mishna the explanation of the verse: “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5). This was elaborated upon when it was taught in a *baraita*: Rabbi Eliezer says: If it is stated: “With all your soul,” why does it state: “With all your might”? Conversely, if it stated: “With all your might,” why does it state: “With all your soul”? Rather, this means that if one’s body is dearer to him than his property, therefore it is stated: “With all your soul”; one must give his soul in sanctification of God. And if one’s money is dearer to him than his body, therefore it is stated: “With all your might”; with all your assets. Rabbi Akiva says: “With all your soul” means: Even if God takes your soul...

The Gemara relates: When they took Rabbi Akiva out to be executed, it was time for the recitation of *Shema*. And they were raking his flesh with iron combs, and he was reciting *Shema*, thereby accepting upon himself the yoke of Heaven. His students said to him: Our teacher, even now, as you suffer, you recite *Shema*? He said to them: All my days I have been troubled by the verse: With all your soul, meaning: Even if God takes your soul. I said to myself: When will the opportunity be afforded me to fulfill this verse? Now that it has been afforded me, shall I not fulfill it? He prolonged his uttering of the word: One, until his soul left his body as he uttered his final word: One

2. Caring for the Body - טהרה Taharah

a. What is Tahor טהור ?

Taharah is less about cleanliness or purity and more about **restoring a being to its original spiritual clarity** or aligning with sacred potential or closer in one’s relationship to holiness...

How do you see holiness?

Elohai Neshamah - prayer upon awakening each morning -Talmud Berakhot 60b:4

My God, the soul You placed within me is pure
Elohai, neshamah shenatata bi tehorah hi

אֱלֹהֵי נִשְׁמָה שֶׁנָּתַתָּ בִּי טְהוֹרָה הִיא

b. Meaning of Water in Taharah - restoring a being to its original spiritual clarity.

Waters of Birth - “As before birth you were surrounded by water, now as you depart this world, we bathe you in water.” (Liturgy of Women’s Taharah)

Waters of life - Mikveh - For women after birth, after menstruation, when life or potential life has left your body. For men, after seed has left their body.

Washing hands before prayer eg Shabbat Challah, Passover seder

c. K’vod HaMeit — Honoring the Deceased

(see *Jewish Practice and Rituals for Death and Mourning, a guide* p10)

The *chevra kadisha* performs the ritual of *taharah* with *k’vod ha-meit*—profound respect for the deceased—ensuring that the traditions of preparing the body for Jewish burial are carried out with dignity, tenderness, and reverence.

Rechitzah (Washing the meitah) The *meitah* (deceased) is gently covered with a clean sheet and a face covering. Throughout the washing, care is taken to preserve modesty and dignity.

Kavanah (setting the intention) Just as _____ was created in God’s image and was beautiful while alive, so may we continue to recognize the beauty of her **neshamah**. As before birth she was surrounded by water, now, as she departs this world, we bathe her in water.

"I wonder if someone washed Bubbe’s arm like this when she died 12 years ago. From Bubbe my thoughts move to her bubbe, and to her bubbe, and then to all the bubbes who have washed and been washed by Jewish women just like me. Suddenly, I am part of the permanence of the Jewish people who have performed this ritual for centuries."
---Nancy Kalikow Maxwell

In Jewish tradition the chevra kaddisha members were anonymous, secret in the community? Thoughts?

Blessings During the Washing

As each part of the body is bathed, words of blessing acknowledge the sacred role it played in life.

Head: *Blessed is your head that housed your thoughts, words, dreams, and visions.*

Neck: *Blessed is your neck that held your head and served as a bridge between head and body.*

Right arm and hand: *Blessed are your shoulder, arm, and hand that labored in your life—shaping, touching, and reaching out.*

Right torso: *Blessed are your chest and abdomen that held your organs of breath and life.*

Right leg and foot: *Blessed are your leg and foot that supported you and carried you on your path.*

Left arm and hand: *Blessed are your arm and hand that opened in friendship and received the gifts that life offered.*

Left torso: *Blessed again are your chest and abdomen that held your vital organs. Blessed is your heart, the vessel of feeling.*

Left leg and foot: *Blessed are your leg and foot that enabled you to journey on your path.*

Back of the body: *Blessed is your spine that held you upright and carried your vital energy.*

d. תַּכְרִיכִים Tachrichim - Ritual Garments

So that we all approach God the same, poor and rich....

Talmud Moed Katan 27b:4

Likewise, at first taking the dead out for burial was more difficult for the relatives than the actual death, because it was customary to bury the dead in expensive shrouds, which the poor could not afford...This lasted until Rabban Gamliel came and acted with frivolity, meaning that he waived his dignity, by leaving instructions that he be taken out for burial in linen garments....And the people adopted this practice after him and had themselves taken out for burial in linen garments....Rav Pappa said: And nowadays, everyone follows the practice of taking out the dead for burial even in plain hemp garments [tzerada] that cost only a dinar.

Is humility sacred?

We dress in white to symbolize *tahara*, awe, prepared to stand before God....

Shulchan Aruch: Yoreh De'ah 352:4

מלבישין המת בגדי לבן כדי להקמות לכהן גדול

They dress the deceased in white garments, similar to the garments of the Kohen Gadol.

Shulchan Aruch, Book of Jewish Law written by Joseph Karo in 1563

Tachrichim prepare us in humility to stand before God....

Pirkei Avot 3:1

Know from where you came, where you are going, and before whom you will give an accounting.

Talmudic Israel, c.190 –

3. שמירה *Shemira* – watching over the *meitah*

When a Jew passes away, it is a mitzvah for another Jew to watch over the body from the time of death until burial. This duty is known as being a *shomer*, a “guard” or “watcher.” Having a *shomer* demonstrates that the departed is not abandoned. Even though the soul has departed, the body is honored, and cared for with dignity and respect.

MIDRASH: Vayikra Rabbah 18:1

Rabbi Abba son of Rav Pappi and Rabbi Yehoshua of Sikhnin in the name of Rabbi Levi: For the first three days, the soul hovers over the body, thinking that it will return to it....When it sees that the aura of the countenance has changed

Would anyone who has been a shomer like to share their experience?

3. Burial

TORAH: God tells Adam [Genesis 3.19]: “You are dust and to dust you will return.”

Abraham purchases for Sarah's burial the Cave of Machpelah (Gen 23:1-20) and later Joseph instructs "carry my bones when you leave Egypt that I may be buried with my ancestors..." (Gen 50:25-26)

Does this mean burial in the earth?

TALMUD - Burial took place in caves, hewn tombs, sarcophagi, and catacombs; and a secondary burial, i.e., a re-interment of the remains sometimes took place about one year after the original burial in ossuaries (Rambam. Yad, Avel, 12:8).

The duty of burial, although primarily an obligation incumbent on the heirs ultimately rests with the whole community. (Talmud, Ketubot 48a)

The essential mitzvah is the prohibition against leaving a body unattended. Ancient Jews regarded an unburied corpse with horror. Abandoning a person's remains to putrefy in public or be eaten by scavenger animals was considered a disgrace. The core reason for mortuary norms, the Talmud [b. Sanhedrin 47a] proposes, is to avoid abandonment. This anxiety was so serious that it inspired the laws of met mitzvah, the command that even high priests or Nazirites must violate the purity of their special status to tend to abandoned corpses [b. Berakhot 19b-20, m. Nazir 7.1=47a].

Coffins were unknown to the early Israelites. The corpse was laid horizontally and face upward on a bier (II Sam. 3:31); the custom of burying important personages in coffins evolved only later. R. Judah ha-Nasi, however, ordered that holes be drilled in the base of his coffin so that his body might touch the soil (TJ, Kil. 9:4, 32b) and Maimonides mentions the custom of burial in wooden coffins (Yad, Avel 4:4). In Erez Israel and some Sephardic communities, coffins are not usually used.

R. Yehuda HaNassi requested that the lower boards be removed from his coffin, so that his body decompose directly into the ground. Based upon this, Nachmanides [Torat HaAdam 2:117] writes that "the optimal mitzvah is burial literally in the earth."

Shulchan Oruch Yorei Deyoh 362 (1)

הנותן מתו בארון ולא קברו בקרקע עובר משום מלין את המת. ואם נתנו בארון וקברו בקרקע אינו עובר עליו, ומכל מקום יפה לקברו בקרקע ממש אפילו בחוצה לארץ.

Someone who puts his deceased relative in a coffin and does not bury it in the ground transgresses the prohibition of delaying burial. If he put the relative in a coffin and buried it in the ground, he does not transgress; but at all events it is better to bury the dead directly in the ground even outside the Land of Israel.

Does this text change the way you think about burial?

The rabbis of the Talmud made it a mitzvah, an obligation to accompany the mourners in burying the dead.

Rambam (Hilchot Avel 14:1)

It is a positive Rabbinic mitzvah to visit the sick, comfort the mourners, escort the dead, marry off a bride, accompany guests, to be involved in all the needs of the burial, to carry the dead on one's shoulder, walk before him, to eulogize, to dig and bury, to gladden the bride and groom, and provide them with all their needs. All of these are gemilus chasadim (acts of kindness) that one performs with his body, and they have no limit (as to how much one can do). Even though all of these mitzvot are Rabbinic, they are included in the mitzvah of "You shall love your friend as yourself. (Lev 19:18)."

Cremation: Jews historically did not cremate because of interpretation of burial as returning to earth "from dust of earth you were taken and to dust of earth you shall return" (Gen 3:19). There is a minority option within the *poskim* that does allow for cremation. Orthodox go by the majority opinion. Conservative will bury cremains in the cemetery but rabbis will not officiate at crematorium. Reform accepts cremation

Organ Donation / Donating Body to Science: Permitted according to Reform and Conservative movements based on laws of *Pikuach Nefesh* (saving a life). In the modern Orthodox and Israel communities Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, zt"l, (Igrot Moshe, Y"D II, 174) rules that **organ donation** is a sacred act of *Pikuach Nefesh*, which overrides the concern for being buried whole. This position has been embraced by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel,