

JEWISH DEATH

Jewish death and mourning rites are governed by two basic principles: respectful treatment of the dead, and consideration for the feelings of the living, the surviving relatives.

When Jewish law mandates that a funeral take place within twenty-four hours after death, it is concerned with respect for the deceased, to leave a body unburied for an extended period of time is considered disrespectful. And when Jewish law mandates that a person be buried in the earth rather than be cremated, its intention is also to show respect for the dead, who in Jewish tradition must be returned to the earth from which man was created.

The requirement that friends of mourners prepare the first meal to be eaten after the funeral is a manifestation of the second basic principle, consideration for the feelings of the living. If left to their own devices, it was feared mourners might neglect to prepare food for themselves thus damaging their health.

AFTER DEATH HAD BEEN DETERMINED

As soon as death is confirmed the position of the body should be so oriented that the feet face the doorway. Other than this, the deceased should not be touched or moved, except for his own honour and should be covered with a sheet. If the death occurs in hospital the staff should remove any tubes (if possible) and if necessary remove the deceased to the hospital mortuary.

A moving custom calls upon relatives and friends present to ask forgiveness of the deceased at this time for any harm or discomfort they might have caused him during his lifetime.

If the death occurs in hospital the doctor who attended the deceased during their final illness will sign a Medical Certificate of Cause of Death (Med. Cert.) which the family will take to the Registry Officer where a Certificate of Burial (Green Form) will be issued along with the registration of death (Death Certificate).

If the deceased passes away at home or in a residential home it is usually the G.P. who attends the patient who will issue a Med. Cert. and in the case where Paramedics pronounce death the family may have to attend the deceased's G.P. surgery to collect the Med. Cert.

Where the deceased's G.P. (may be an on-call doctor) or the Doctor in the hospital will not issue a Med. Cert. for whatever reason, the death will be reported to the Coroner. The Coroner will then either discuss the death with the G.P. and family of the deceased then issue an 'A' pass (Pink Form this is usually sent direct to the Registry Office) or will call for a Post Mortem.

PREPARATION OF THE DECEASED: TAHARA

“As he came, so shall he go.” Just as a new born 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 Tahara (purification).

The Jewish Undertaker will remove the deceased from where he has passed away to the Tahara House where the Tahara is performed by the Chevra Kadisha (the Holy Burial Society), consisting of Jews who are knowledgeable in the area of these duties, and can display proper respect for the deceased.

The Tahara is carried out by three members of the Chevra Kadisha, men for a male deceased and women for a female deceased. No members of the deceased's family take part.

All clothing and any jewellery are removed. The deceased is washed whilst being kept covered at all possible times to maintain dignity, the Tahara is performed and the relevant prayers are said. The deceased is dressed in 'shrouds' (Tachrichim) which consist of trousers with feet in, two shirts a sash and a bonnet, men are also wrapped in their pray shawl. Both men and women are wrapped in a sheet placed in the casket where Israeli soil is sprinkled on the deceased. The Tachrichim are made from white cotton or linen. White as a sign of purity and cotton or linen so that everyone is buried the same.

The casket used should be of plain wood without nails or anything metal so that the body, shrouds and casket decompose at more or less the same time.

THE BURIAL

The Undertaker arrives at the Tahara House with the Hearse and transports the deceased first to the Synagogue where the deceased was a member and it is there that the 'cutting' (kria) is performed on the family. Kria is carried out by a member of the Chevra Kadisha cutting the garments of the direct relatives of the deceased (mother, father, sister, brother, son, daughter, husband/wife) relevant prayers are said at this time by the relatives they themselves tear where the cut was made and declare God is the true judge. The two main reasons for this are, 1) Jacob on hearing his son Joseph had been killed by a wild animal tore his garments in grief and 2) this is symbolic of in Biblical days people used to cut themselves in grief.

The Hearse and family car then leave the Synagogue for the cemetery which in most cases is situated outside the city, as the dead were always buried outside the city walls. At the cemetery the Rabbi is waiting, the casket is removed from the Hearse into the prayer hall where prayers and the eulogy are said by the Rabbi and sometimes a member of the family will say a few words. The casket is then accompanied to the grave side by everyone and while being lowered prayers are again recited; the grave is then filled in.

Embalming the deceased is objected to for two reasons. 1) It is considered to be disrespectful to the dead and 2) embalming retards the swift decomposition of the body, thereby delaying its return to the earth. Of course if a body is being repatriated from a foreign country and it is their law to embalm before transporting the deceased then we comply with the law of that land.

Cremation is considered to be a violation of Jewish law based on the statement in the Book of Genesis (3:19) in which God says to Adam, "For dust thou art and unto dust shall thou return." This means that the body itself must be returned to the earth from which it was formed. Cremating the deceased also has an effect on the soul when it departs from the body.

Post Mortem is traditionally opposed in Jewish law based on the firm belief that people are created in the image of God and that it would be sacrilegious to mutilate God's creation. Jews also believe that in the end of days God will resurrect the bodies of the dead, and any disfigurement of the body would interfere with the process. Invasive Post Mortem is also opposed because it is thought to be a violation of 'Koved Ha'met (respect for the dead), the Jewish concept demanding that the deceased be treated with dignity. Of course if civil law demands a post mortem then we comply with that.

M.R.I./CAT Scans As opposed to invasive post mortems are welcomed within the Jewish community for determining the cause of death. As previously mentioned above respect for the deceased is paramount and the scans would give a speedy interpretation so that the burial can take place as quickly as possible. The Leeds Jewish community used M.R.I. scans approximately six years ago at the Nuffield Hospital and then later at Dewsbury Hospital, they have now been re-established at the Spire Hospital Roundhay Leeds through Elite.

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