

Life, Death and Mourning

Pikuach Nefesh

Jewish tradition emphasizes the sacredness of life. The mitzvah of *Pikuach Nefesh* embodies this value—it means saving a life and is used in many instances to show the great value of a human life. For example, someone who is sick and needs to eat is forbidden to fast on Yom Kippur because of this value—it is more important for that person to take care of his/her life than to follow the tradition.

The Jewish culture celebrates the sacredness in earthly pleasures. We bless food and wine, thank God for our food after eating and also celebrate sexuality in the context of covenanted relationships. Our focus is not on life after death, but on life.

Death Teaches about Life

Jewish culture does not look away or deny the impact of death or grief, but instead gives a process for mourners to go through to accept that death is part of life.

Ethical Wills

There is a tradition of creating something called an Ethical Will that allows an individual to write about his/her values and wisdom that he/she would like to pass on to his/her family after dying. This tradition shows the importance of passing on wisdom and learning from one generation to the next and gives an individual a ritual for feeling closure in reaching the end of one's life.

Baruch Dayan Ha'Emet

This Hebrew phrase is what is traditionally uttered when someone hears about a person who has died. It literally means “Blessed be the True Judge” and its meaning may allude to helping the mourning accept that this new reality of loss is true, even as one struggles to accept the loss of a loved one.

Kriah

Kriah is an ancient tradition that expresses the anger and sadness that is part of grief. Kriah translates to “tearing” and refers to the custom of ripping one’s clothes or ripping a black ribbon after losing a loved one. Kriah is performed by a spouse, child, parent and sibling of the deceased. The torn ribbon is worn for the seven days of morning (except for Shabbat).

Hevra Kadisha

Because human life is so valued, it is treated with care in death as well as in life. A Hevre Kadisha (holy community) is a group of people who ritually wash a body (this process is called *tahara*) after someone has died. The process of *tahara* takes place as soon as possible. It is considered a great honor to be part of a Hevre Kadisha.

Funeral and Shiva

A Jewish funeral can take place at a synagogue or funeral home and always concludes with a graveside ceremony. The Mourners Kaddish and a prayer called “El Malay Rachameem” are recited. Often, someone close to the deceased gives a eulogy and psalms are usually recited.

In a traditional Jewish funeral, the casket is closed and people attending the funeral do not view the body.

After the casket is placed into the grave, mourners take a shovel and put dirt on top of the casket. This process is also about acknowledging that death is real.

Following the funeral, people join with the mourners for a meal; the custom is that people who have experienced loss need to eat to go forward with their lives. For the week after a loved one’s death, the family holds “shiva” (literally translated as “seven” for the seven days).

Shiva is a time to visit the family and offer consolation. Traditionally, a service would be held twice a day and the Mourners Kaddish would be recited. Often a family will invite people to share memories of the loved one. It is customary to bring food to the home.

Kaddish

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Although the Mourners Kaddish is recited at a funeral, at shiva and for a Yahrzeit, this special prayer does not mention death. It is a prayer (written in Aramaic) that praises God and calls for the establishment of God's dominion over the earth. The ritual of saying Mourners Kaddish expresses that the mourner still has faith in God, despite the loss he/she has experienced.

Sheloshim

The thirty days following the burial of a loved one are called Shloshim (literally, "Thirty"). During this time, mourners go back to work and begin to resume their regular schedules

Unveiling and Year of Mourning

When a parent is lost, it is the tradition to recite the Mourners kaddish for an entire year and many traditional Jews do not participate in celebrations during this year.

An unveiling of a tombstone takes place generally a year after death. Family and close friends gather at the graveside and where a stone has now been laid. Kaddish is recited and memories may be shared. This is another step in the process of allowing the mourners to realize that the death of their loved one is a new reality.

Yahrzeit

The tradition of Yahrzeit—remembering the anniversary of a loved ones death—continues the process of making sacred space for loss and grief throughout one's life. Traditionally, Yahrzeit applied to remembering the anniversary of a parent's death, and involves lighting a special memorial candle that burns for 24 hours in the parent's memory. A mourner joins a minyan (group of ten Jews) to recite Kaddish.

Many people observe the Yahrzeit of other loved ones with the ritual of lighting a memorial candle on the anniversary of the loved one's death.

Stones on Graves

It is an ancient Jewish custom to put stones on a grave. There are many explanations for this custom and most center around the idea that stones are permanent—and that our memories of a loved one are also permanent, even when he/she has died.

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