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Death, burial and mourning in Judaism

Abstract

Death is a universal experience for every human being. Followers of Judaism believe that God, who is the giver of life, gives and takes life at the appropriate time. Everything that man receives from His hand is good; it is part of the divine plan, including death. Judaism, however, advises its followers to prepare themselves adequately for the coming death and accompanying, helping and supporting the dying is treated in Judaism not so much as a duty but as an honour. Also after death, the body should never be left alone. The preparation of the body for burial, funeral and mourning involves specific rituals described in this article. Knowing and understanding dying and bereavement-related customs of followers of Judaism should contribute to appropriately respecting their cultural beliefs, customs and spiritual needs when providing palliative care.

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“The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Kaddish)

Death is a universal experience for every human being. Followers of Judaism believe that God, who is the giver of life, gives and takes life at the appropriate time. Therefore, death is not a bad thing because it is given by God. Everything that man receives from His hand is good; it is part of the divine plan. This view is common to all factions of Judaism.

Preparation for death

Judaism advises its followers to prepare adequately for the coming death. A dying person should know that his or her life is about to come to an end. In a situation where the end of life is approaching, the old or sick can write an ethical will. This is a type of document in which the dying person passes on their spiritual legacy to their descendants. The ethical will may include a summary of life, recollections of important events, thanks and good wishes for loved

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ones, recommendations for posterity or advice on how the family should continue to live. The ethical will is generally in a cordial and friendly tone. It becomes a nice memento of the deceased person for the family. A close family member or friend often helps to write the ethical will.

When death is approaching, if the dying person is conscious, it is advised to say a prayer that is a sort of confessional prayer (Hebrew: *viddui*). It is a kind of confession of guilt, admission of mistakes, negligence, and at the same time a plea for God's mercy. A Jew may utter the words: "I Acknowledge and confess before thee, O Lord my God, and the God of my Fathers, the Mighty God of the Spirits of all flesh, that both my Health and Death are in thy hands. Restore me I beseech thee to my former health; be mindful of me, and hear my Prayers, as in the time of King Ezechias, when he also was grievously sick: But if the time of my Visitation become that I must die, let my death be an Expiation for all my sins, iniquities, and transgressions; whether I have committed them ignorantly, or knowingly, from the day that I first drew in the light. Grant I beseech thee, that I may have my Portion in Paradise, and the future World appointed for the Just". The presence of a rabbi during this prayer is not necessary. The dying person also recites the Shema Yisrael prayer, which is important to Jews and consists of passages from Deuteronomy and Numbers. This prayer is customarily recited every morning and evening. The Shema Yisrael prayer begins with the words "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One". This prayer is precisely a confession of faith in one God, in God's revelation expressed through the Torah and in the hope of eternal life [1–5].

Accompanying the dying person

A dying Jew should not feel alone. A member of the Jewish community's immediate family should be notified of the impending death. The rabbi of the community to which the dying person belongs is also notified. Accompanying, helping and supporting a dying person is treated in Judaism not so much as a duty, but as an honour. Those closest to the dying person try, if possible, to accompany them constantly, both at home and in the hospital, so that they are never left alone in the face of impending death. Relatives care for the physical, mental and spiritual comfort of the sick person. No one should disturb the dying person; he or she should have a sense of security. Silence is usually reserved for the moment of agony. The closest person — usually a man, especially a son — closes the eyes of the deceased. It is now he who becomes

the head of the family and is responsible for organising funeral ceremonies.

Immediately after death, the body of the deceased is laid on its back with the hands placed along the torso, and covered with a sheet. A lit candle, the symbol of the deceased's soul, is placed on the headboard. A window is opened to allow the soul of the deceased to leave the room. In some Orthodox communities, the body is placed on the floor with the feet facing the door and water is poured in front of the house as a sign that death has come to the house. The body of the deceased is never left alone. In addition to relatives, a guardian (Hebrew: *shomer*), who is usually someone from outside the family of the deceased, watches over the body at all times and prays by reciting the Psalms. Jews believe that the soul of the deceased is present near the body, and leaving the body alone would indicate disregard for the body. Keeping vigil with the deceased ensures the soul's safety and protects it from evil spirits [1, 2, 5, 6].

Preparations for a funeral

The burial of a Jew should take place within 24 hours of death, hence traditionally the dead are buried at different times of the day, including night. If death occurs on a Sabbath or an important holiday, the burial takes place later. Currently, the rules for burying the dead are determined by the funerary law of the country concerned. According to Polish regulations, the corpse of the deceased cannot be buried until 24 hours after death. Extending the time until the funeral is a cause of concern for Jewish believers because — according to them — until the funeral, the soul is suspended between earth and heaven, causing it to suffer.

According to tradition, the funeral arrangements — including the preparation of the body for burial — are handled by a funeral brotherhood (Hebrew: *chevrah kadisha*). In Poland, before the Second World War, such brotherhoods functioned in individual Jewish communities. After the war, however, the tradition disappeared. The funeral brotherhoods were made up of reputable, very religious people, and membership was an honour. The tradition of dealing with burial within a funeral brotherhood was often passed down from generation to generation. In the 21st century, several funeral brotherhoods have been re-founded in major cities, including Krakow, Warsaw and Wroclaw. These brotherhoods operate on a charitable basis. Service in a funeral brotherhood is seen as the greatest good deed (Hebrew: *mitzvah*), for which no payment is expected. Traditional Jewish funerals in Poland are few, a few per year.

Jews believe in the eternal life of the soul as well as the body, so the body should be properly prepared for burial and thus for the coming of the Messiah. The preparation of the body for burial takes place in pre-burial houses (Bet Tahara) located at Jewish cemeteries. Such houses were numerous in Poland before the Second World War; during the war, most of them were destroyed. Several of them were rebuilt after the war. In most cases, however, they no longer fulfil their original function and are, for example, Jewish cultural centres or museums. Active pre-burial houses currently exist in Krakow and Lodz, among others. If there is no such house in a particular place, the preparation of the body for burial takes place in the buildings of funeral companies.

Preparation of the body for burial includes cleansing, ritual washing and clothing (Hebrew: *taharah*). The body of the deceased is placed on a stone table. First, the skin is cleansed of excreta and blood. All dressing materials (plasters, bandages), catheters and intravenous cannulas must be removed. Materials with the deceased's blood on them are buried with the deceased. The body is washed with clean water, starting with the head, followed by washing the right side of the body, then the left side. Fingernails are cleaned, hair is cut and combed, and beard is trimmed. These activities are carried out carefully and gently, with great respect for the body, which is never left fully exposed. Placing the body on the stomach is excluded, as this position is considered degrading to the deceased. Only women are allowed to participate in this type of activity for the female deceased, while the bodies of the male deceased should be cleaned by men, but exceptionally women are also allowed to be present. During the preparation of the body for burial, members of the funeral brotherhood recite verses from the Torah, the Book of Psalms, the Books of the Prophets and the Song of Songs, especially those praising the beauty of the body.

The most important step in preparing the body for burial is the ritual washing. For this, the body should remain in a standing position — usually supported by a vertically placed table and held up by 2–4 people. Two more people are involved in the washing, which involves pouring an uninterrupted stream of water over the deceased in accordance with halakha (Torah interpretation). Approximately 18 litres of water are used during the ritual washing. In Israel, pre-burial houses are equipped with ritual baths (Hebrew: *mikvah*) where the whole body can be immersed in water. During *taharah*, the water must reach every nook and cranny of the skin.

The body of the deceased is dressed in modest white clothing, usually linen (Hebrew: *tachrichim*), al-

most the same for both sexes. The *tachrichim* consists of a headdress, shirt, sleeves and a type of trousers for men and a skirt for women, which are sewn at the bottom. The man's body is additionally wrapped in a tallit, the prayer shawl of the deceased (Hebrew: *talit*), in which one of the large tassels is cut off. Eggshells or parts of a battered unglazed clay vessel are placed over the eyes. Soil from Israel is sprinkled over the body of the dead buried outside Israel and, in the case of men, also under the headdress. According to tradition, those who lie in the land of Israel will be resurrected first in the Messianic era.

The body of a follower of Judaism should be buried intact. This stems from the belief that the body was created in God's image — according to Genesis: "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them". The body must not be destroyed or altered in any way, as this would be detrimental to the image of God in man and even offensive to Him. This is why cremation and embalming of the corpse is forbidden in Judaism. The body should be returned to the earth in its natural form, as it was when alive. The body is not exposed to the public either. An examination of the body after death is generally not accepted. Autopsies are performed exceptionally; rabbinic approval is required. Autopsies are permitted in special cases where the cause of death is not certain and must be established for legal reasons such as suspected murder. The pre-burial house (Bet Tahara) in Krakow, built in 1903, had a special room reserved for autopsies due to the need to comply with state law [1–4, 7–9].

Funeral

The burial should take place as soon as possible. The burial ceremony in Judaism is very modest. In Israel, the body is buried directly in the ground, wrapped in a shroud in accordance with the Book of Genesis, where it is written: "You return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return". As late as the 1960s, this was also how dead Jews were buried in Poland, with a wooden framework arranged in the grave beforehand, and then covered with a wooden lid. Nowadays in Poland, Jews are buried in a coffin, which, however, has an opening "under the head" — in this way, the body is symbolically deposited directly into the earth. Coffins may have a special net instead of a bottom, which also gives the desired effect of being buried in the ground. The coffin should be simple, assembled from boards without the use of nails.

A Jewish funeral begins with prayers in the pre-burial house (Bet Tahara). Funeral prayers do not

refer to death, rather they praise the wisdom and goodness of God. They also include hopeful pleas for forgiveness and mercy for the deceased. This is followed by a eulogy in honour of the deceased. The funeral procession is then formed and stops several times (usually seven) during the march towards the grave. During these stops it is advisable for the mourners to make an inner reflection on life and death. The funeral procession (Hebrew: *levaya*) is a form of accompanying the deceased, referring to the journey of Jacob's children with his body from Egypt to the resting place of Abraham and Isaac, which was — according to tradition — in Hebron, where he was to be buried. Following the coffin is considered a sign of respect towards the deceased. If anyone happens to be in the path of the funeral procession, they should join the funeral procession for at least a few steps out of respect for the deceased.

Just before being placed in the grave, the prayer Justification of Judgement (Hebrew: *Tziduk Hadin*) is recited. After the coffin is lowered into the grave, each mourner spills earth on it with his or her hand, then the grave is quickly backfilled. Backfilling of graves with earth is very important in Jewish tradition. Helping to backfill a grave is considered an honour and is not left to anonymous gravediggers. Backfilling of graves is considered a *mitzvah* (good deed). Orthodox Jews only backfill the grave using their hands; for other factions, this custom may be fulfilled only in part. The son of the deceased recites the *Kaddish of Renewal* (Hebrew: *Kaddish Le'ithadeta*). The *Kaddish* is one of the most important and frequently recited prayers in Jewish liturgy. It is a prayer in Aramaic, glorifying God and the life that comes from Him. It does not contain words of regret or resentment towards God (e.g. that He has taken away a loved one), but a confession of faith in the one God and acceptance of God's judgment. There are several varieties of *Kaddish*, which are recited on various occasions for special intentions. The *Orphan's Kaddish*, also known as the *Mourner's Kaddish* (Hebrew: *Kaddish Yatom*), is recited for deceased parents by the son, who expresses faith on their behalf in this prayer. This prayer is recited throughout mourning and on the anniversary of the death. Jews recite the *Kaddish* in a standing posture, facing Jerusalem. When reciting the *Kaddish*, the presence of at least ten Jews (Hebrew: *minyan*) is desirable, for only this makes the prayer valid and pleasing to God.

After the coffin has been buried, the mourners present at the ceremony line up in two rows facing each other, the deceased's immediate family passes between them and delivers words of consolation. No flowers are placed on the grave; instead, donations are now often made to charity. After the funeral, a tra-

ditional meal is eaten, during which it is customary to serve eggs (a symbol of new life), lentils and round rolls baked especially for the occasion. This meal is often prepared by friends of the family [1, 3–6, 8–10].

Mourning

As a sign of mourning, Jews tear their clothes at the heart level for a few centimetres (Hebrew: *keria*). In the case of the death of a parent, Jews tear their clothes on the left side, and for other dead individuals — on the right side. Men tear the lapel of their jackets. This is a reference to biblical descriptions of tearing garments in a gesture of despair, for example, David tore his garments upon hearing of King Saul's death. Similarly, Jacob tore his garments when he saw Joseph's blood-stained coat and thought his son was dead. Some Jews wear a *keria* throughout mourning. Sometimes, mourners wear a torn black ribbon bow instead of a tear in their clothing. A Jew is obliged to mourn the death of the seven closest people, which include father, mother, brother, sister, son, daughter and spouse.

Mourning in Judaism is divided into several stages. The time between death and burial, usually one day, is called *aninut* (deep sorrow). Mourners (Hebrew: *onen*), depressed by the death of a loved one and burdened with funeral preparations, are exempt from all religious obligations. During this time, they submit to mortification, avoiding comforts such as not sleeping in bed, not sitting in a chair, not bathing for pleasure, not having sex, and not working. In the period between the death of a loved one and their funeral, no meat is eaten and no alcohol is drunk. They are only allowed to leave the house for a short time.

The first seven days after the funeral are called *shiva* (seven). The tradition of seven days of deep mourning probably refers to the seven-day mourning for Joseph by his father Jacob, which was described in Genesis. During this time, the loss of a loved one is particularly painful. The *onen* remain in the "house of mourning", which may or may not be the family home. It is a period of intense prayer, reflection, remembering the deceased and mourning him or her. For seven days, a candle is burnt for the intention of the deceased. The relatives of the deceased do not go to work; they may only go out for a short time, for example to the synagogue or their own home. During this time, Jews forgo comfort and convenience — they sit on low stools or the floor, do not shave, do not cut their hair, do not take a bath, and it is forbidden to dress in adorned clothing, wear leather shoes, put on make-up, wear jewellery or have sex. All mirrors in the house are covered. Prayers are said, and the Psalms and other books of the Bible are read. The most important prayer

is the *Mourner's Kaddish*. If it is not possible to gather the *minyan* (ten men) in the house of mourning, the prayer is held in the synagogue. However, the *Kaddish* is not a prayer of mourning and sorrow, but one that affirms life and glorifies God as its giver. In some communities, this prayer is also recited by women. At the house of mourning, the family is visited by distant relatives and friends, condolences are offered and the deceased is remembered together. Relatives, friends and neighbours bring support to the orphaned, not only comforting them but also providing for their vital needs, for example, looking after children, doing shopping, and preparing meals. Persons engaged in important public functions, for example, doctors and police officers, may be exempted from *shiva* observance. Shabbat and the holidays abolish mourning. After seven days, the family officially goes out for a walk, showing a return to the world. In some communities, a gathering combined with a meal or a synagogue service is practised at the end of the *shiva*.

The next period of mourning is *sheloshim* (thirty). Mourners already return to work but avoid entertainment, do not put on new clothes, do not shave or cut their hair, and do not marry. Orthodox Jews do not listen to the radio or watch television. In the synagogue during services, it is customary for mourners to stand at the back of the synagogue, closest to the door. They still wear torn clothing. The *Mourner's Kaddish* is recited daily. There is a belief that the soul of even the most hardened sinner is purified within one year of death, hence the mourning usually lasts eleven months so as not to imply that the deceased was a bad person.

On the first anniversary of the death (Hebrew: *yarcait*), the orphans visit the grave, placing candles on it, and the *Mourner's Kaddish* is also recited in the synagogue. This is when the *Matzevah* ceremony is usually held, involving the laying or unveiling of a gravestone. This day finally closes the period of mourning. This period can be commemorated by additional mortifications, for example, fasting, prayer, not shaving, and donating to charity. After the mourning period is over, the dead are remembered and prayed for during the Jewish holidays (*Yom Kippur*, *Pesah*, *Shavuot* and *Sukkot*). Traditional mourning is not observed for a child under thirty days of age, for a Jew who has departed from Judaism, been cremated, committed suicide or disappeared and whose body has not been found [1, 2, 6, 8, 9].

Jewish cemetery

The oldest and most important Jewish cemetery is the one on the slope of the Mount of Olives in Jerusa-

lem, where the first burials date back to a thousand years BCE. Nowadays, the prices of burial plots in this cemetery are very expensive. As the Jews believe, this is where the resurrection of the dead will begin after the coming of the Messiah. In Poland, Jewish cemeteries probably appeared at the turn of the 12th and 13th centuries. Initially, they were located next to synagogues but later they began to be placed outside city walls. The distance from the buildings to the cemetery was required to be at least 50 cubits. The cemetery was enclosed by earthworks, ditches or walls to emphasise the separation of the living from the dead. There were usually two entrances in the cemetery wall, as after a visit to the cemetery you had to exit through a different gate than you entered and wash your hands in the process.

For followers of Judaism, the cemetery is a special place where the dead await the resurrection. Graves should not be disturbed. Exhumations are only exceptionally carried out, always with the permission of the rabbi. However, there is no permission to exhume the graves of people who have died for their faith (e.g. Holocaust victims). In Jewish cemeteries, trees are not cut down, animal grazing is not allowed, and nothing is improved. The cemetery should be properly respected, for example, you cannot walk through the cemetery to shorten your route, you must not eat, drink, smoke or wear a tallit in the cemetery, and men should wear a head covering. According to Rabbi Abraham Ginsberg, director of the Committee for the Preservation of Jewish Cemeteries in Europe (CPJCE), "The soul suffers when a grave is disturbed or even when disrespect is shown to what appear to us to be merely dry bones. The soul and spirit can only be at rest if the physical body in which they were located is at rest in the grave it acquired during its lifetime or which was allocated for it after death".

Graves are usually single; no mausolea are built. In Ashkenazi Jews in Central and Eastern Europe, the tombstone (Hebrew: *matzevah*) is usually placed vertically, while in Western Europe it is placed horizontally. It can be made of various materials — stone, cast iron or wood. In the past, tombstones only displayed the names of the deceased, the names of their fathers and the date of death according to the Jewish calendar — the years being counted from the medieval-accepted date of the creation of the world, 3761 BCE. Usually, the Hebrew letters TNCBH, an abbreviation of the phrase "may his/her soul be tied together in the circle of eternal life" or "let his/her soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life", are placed at the bottom of the tombstone. Previously, elaborate, even poetic, epitaphs were placed on tombstones. There are usually no pictures

or likenesses of the deceased on tombstones. However, they often feature a bas-relief that symbolically refers to the deceased's origin, profession, function, virtue or name (e.g. a lion symbolises descent from the tribe of Judah, a lancet symbolises a person who performed circumcision, an Aesculapian snake symbolises a doctor). In the past, miniature tombstones were also made and kept in homes; on the anniversary of a death, a candle was lit in front of them and prayers were said. Until recently, men and women were buried in separate burial plots or even in separate parts of the cemetery. Some cemeteries had separate quarters for distinguished people, such as tzaddikim or rabbis. A so-called tent (Hebrew: *ohel*), which is a type of tomb, was sometimes built over their graves. When visiting the graves of the dead, Jews do not bring flowers, which are associated with festivity, joy and life. They usually leave a stone, a symbol of longevity.

Hasidim — members of a mystical religious movement split from Judaism in the 18th century — cherish peregrinations to the graves of deceased tzaddikim, the spiritual leaders of the communities. The tzaddik is considered a spiritual master and a kind of mediator between God and the community. Hasidim believe that a person's soul descends into the grave on the anniversary of their death and can continue to mediate between the living and God. Therefore, Hasidim come in large numbers to the graves of deceased spiritual masters with their requests to God, which are written on votive cards and left on the grave. There are 35 graves of tzaddikim in Poland, the most famous of whom was Elimelech of Lizhensk. Rabbi Elimelech argued that the strengths and talents with which each person is endowed must not be underestimated, and if you desire very much, you will find a part of God within yourself: "When I stand before the Divine Court — after I have left this world — I am not afraid of any question, such as: »Why were you not like Abraham?« I fear only one question: »Why weren't you Rabbi Elimelech, why weren't you yourself?!«". [2, 6, 9, 11–14].

What happens after death?

The views on life after death vary according to the faction of the followers of Judaism. References to the immortality of the soul, the resurrection of the body and life after death are found in many of Judaism's holy books, such as the Bible, as well as in numerous later texts, such as the Talmud, rabbinic commentaries, Midrashim, and Kabbalah explanations. However, there is no unified view among Jews

on this issue. To put it simply, Orthodox Judaism accepts belief in the resurrection of both body and soul, while Reform Judaism does not recognise the resurrection of the body but believes in some form of spiritual life after death. Jews, according to the law, should focus on living according to the commandments rather than thinking about life after death. Hasidim believe that fulfilling God's commandments is not a focus on mortification and asceticism, but God is to be glorified through the wise and joyful use of life and its gifts. This belief is accompanied by enthusiasm, joy and self-acceptance. Hasidim worship God through, among other things, joyful singing and dancing, and ecstatic prayer. They believe that through these rituals and the joy they release, God can be accessible to everyone. A proper commitment to worldly matters is seen by Jews as a condition for meeting God in the future. Doing good and helping others are a sign of Israel's broad covenant with God — the Lord of Life and Death [1, 5, 15].

Conclusions

Knowing and understanding the worship and customs of Judaism related to dying, burial and bereavement can be useful for palliative care providers to appropriately respect the piety, cultural beliefs and customs of followers of Judaism. This knowledge can help discern and meet the spiritual needs of followers of Judaism and their families. It can also provide additional prompting for those involved in the care of the dying and their loved ones so that the psychosocial support they provide is appropriate and effective.

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