

The Florence Melton Adult Mini-School
Section: Rhythms of Jewish Living
<http://mcohen02.tripod.com/rhythms.html>
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Topic: Rituals of Death and Burial

Key Idea: The most painful events of the Jewish life cycle are, perhaps paradoxically, the ones that sometimes draw Jews back to tradition, that is, those associated with death and/or with mourning for a loved one. Today's lesson will introduce some of the rituals of *kavod ha-met* ("honoring the dead") and *chesed shel emet* ("true lovingkindness"), which are performed out of respect for the deceased; the laws of *aninut* which apply during the period between death and burial; the *levayah* (funeral procession) and *kevurah* (burial).

"Many contemporary Jews know little about Jewish practices surrounding death and mourning; Jewishly unprepared for death, they can be denied the meaning of ritual at this important time and the opportunity for consolation through ancient traditions. Those who are familiar with the rites of mourning--especially as more and more people find themselves present at the moment of death--know what initial steps to take to preserve the dignity of the deceased and help ease the pain of their own loss. For many who feel "lost" upon witnessing or learning of the death of a loved one, these time-honored practices can bring comfort."

<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/lifecycle/Death/About_Death_and_Mourning.htm>

Our discussion of the texts:

Text 1: Yosef Karo, Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah 339:4. A dying person should not be left alone.

Suppl. text: Response when hearing of a death:

Baruch Dayan ha-emet ("Blessed be the Judge of Truth" or "Blessed is the True Judge")

Suppl. text: Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*.

The first period [of mourning] is that between death and burial (*aninut*), during which time despair is most intense. At this time, not only the social amenities, but even major positive religious requirements, were cancelled in recognition of the mourner's troubled mind.

Text 3: Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*. Respect for the body of the deceased reflects the belief in the sacredness of humanity.

Suppl. text: Marsha B. Cohen, "What Jews do When Someone Dies." *Miami Jewish Tribune*, May 8-14, 1992. The five elements of a traditional Jewish funeral are *taharah* (washing the body by a *chevra kadisha* (burial society)), *tachrichim* (dressing the body in a white shroud; *shmirah* (not leaving the body alone from the time of death until its burial); *keriah* (rending of their garments by mourners) and *kevirah* (burial of the body in the ground). Obstacles to arranging for a traditional Jewish funeral erected by the contemporary American funeral industry and how to overcome them.

Text 4: Talmud, Shabbat 127a (recited in the morning blessings of the daily prayer service). *Levaya*--honoring the deceased by accompanying his or her bier to the grave—is one of the most important acts of lovingkindness (*chesed*).

Suppl. text: Ron Wolfson: *A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort*.

Jewish tradition places a great value on the interactive nature of burying the dead. The rabbi doesn't bury the dead. Neither does the cemetery worker. Rather, the bereaved family, assisted by the community, is responsible for this most important *mitzvah* [commandment] of bringing the dead to the final resting place.

Text 6: Yosef Karo, Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah 344. *Hesped* – appropriately eulogizing the deceased.

Suppl. text: Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*.

Very wisely, the Jewish tradition requires the eulogizing of the dead to be *kara'ui*, balanced and appropriate. It may not grossly exaggerate, or invent, qualities that the deceased did not in fact possess. Such praise is a mockery and an effrontery to the departed, rather than a tribute to his personal virtues. In addition, the mourners should remember that although the deceased may have been undistinguished in many ways, and lacking certain moral qualities, there is always a substratum of goodness and decency in all men which can be detected if properly sought. Sometimes the mourners are too close to their departed and see only mediocrity and perhaps meanness. But, sometimes, a more objective view reveals virtues unknown or latent: honesty or frankness or humaneness or respect or tolerance, or simply the ability to raise decent children in a violent and unstable world.

Text 7: Yosef Karo, Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah 362. The importance of a speedy burial.

Text 8: Morris M. Shapiro, *Cremation in the Jewish Tradition*. The Conservative movement's official position on cremation.

Text 9: CCAR Responsa, "When a Parent Request Cremation." The current Reform position on cremation.

Find out more about the details of Jewish funerals from:

http://www.myjewishlearning.com/lifecycle/Death/Burial_Mourning/Funeral.htm