

Topic: Rituals of Mourning

Key Idea: Jewish mourning is divided into several stages. *Aninut* is the period between the time of death of an immediate family member and the day of the *levayah* (funeral service) and *kevarah* (burial). The first seven days following the burial is known as *shiva* (from the Hebrew word for seven). Traditionally the mourners do not leave the house during *shiva*, except on Shabbat, when most of the mourning rituals are suspended. It is customary for visitors to come to the home of the mourners to comfort them. In some communities, a *shiva minyan* comes to the home of the mourner for prayer. The traditional custom of providing food for the mourners, so that they do not have to prepare food for themselves, has unfortunately degenerated into a perceived obligation that mourners entertain their visitors and provide them with food and beverages.

After the seven days of *shiva*, some mourning rituals apply for a period of 30 days (*sheloshim*). Moroccan Sephardim hold a special meal and study session (*mishmara*) at the end of *shiva* and at the end of *Sheloshim*. Some mourning customs, such as not attending joyful events and the recitation of *Kaddish*, extend for eleven months following the burial, or for a full year. The anniversary of the death is commemorated annually by *yahrtzeit* (in Ladino, *nahala*). It is traditional to light a 24 hour *yahrtzeit* candle the evening prior to the anniversary and to recite *Kaddish* on the anniversary. (Some have the custom of reciting *Kaddish* at the synagogue on the Shabbat before the date of commemoration.) Among Ashkenazim, after the first year, departed ones are also recalled during the *yizkor* service on the High Holy Days and on the second day and last days of festivals.

Our discussion of the texts:

Text 1: Mark Washofsky, *Death and Mourning*. Whether or not mourning is a biblical commandment, the purpose of mourning practices are to respond to the inner needs of the mourner during a difficult time of loss.

Text 2: Yosef Karo, *Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah 340:1*. *Keri'ah*—rending the garment—as a symbol of grief. Originally *ker'iah* was done upon receiving the news of the death, but now usually takes place at the funeral. Among many Sephardim, it is customary to rend the garment after returning home from the cemetery. For a parent the rending is on the left side and visible; for all other relatives, it is done on the right side and does not need to be visible.

Text 3: Yosef Karo, *Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah 341:1*. *Aninut* is the period of mourning between death and burial. The mourner is exempt from observance of all positive commandments. Eating meat and drinking wine are prohibited according to traditional Jewish practice.

Text 4: Joseph B. Soloveitchik. “The Halakhah of the First Day.” Insights into the grief and despair felt during *aninut* and the rationale behind *halakhic* exemption from performance of *mitzvot*.

Text 5: Yosef Karo, *Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah 341:1*. *Nichum aveilim* – comforting the mourners. Out of respect for the feelings of the mourner, *halakhic* protocol recommends

allowing the mourner to speak first, and leaving when the mourner no longer wishes to have company.

Texts 6 and 7: Rabbi Yosef Karo, *Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah* 380:1; 391:1. The mourning period is divided into the first seven days (*shivah*) after the funeral; *sheloshim* (the first 30 days of mourning); and yod bet—a one year period after the date of death.

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

The second stage [of mourning] consists of the first three days following burial, days devoted to weeping and lamentation. During this time, the mourner does not even respond to greetings, and remains in his home (except under certain special circumstances). It is a time when even visiting the mourner is usually somewhat discouraged, for it is too early to comfort the mourners when the wound is so fresh.

Third is the period of *shiva*, the seven days following burial. (This longer period includes the first three days.) During this time the mourner emerges from the stage of intense grief to a new state of mind in which he is prepared to talk about his loss and to accept comfort from friends and neighbors. The world now enlarges for the mourner. While he remains within the house, expressing his grief through the observances of *aveilut*—the wearing of the rent garment, the sitting on the low stool, the wearing of slippers, the refraining from shaving and grooming, the recital of the *Kaddish*—his acquaintances come to his home to express sympathy in his distress. The inner freezing that came with the death of his relative now begins to thaw. The isolation from the world of people and the retreat inward now relaxes somewhat, and normalcy begins to return.

Fourth is the stage of *sheloshim* the 30 days following burial (which includes the *shiva*). The mourner is encouraged to leave the house after *shiva* and to slowly rejoin society, always recognizing that enough time has not yet elapsed to assume full, normal, social relations. The rent clothing may customarily still be worn for deceased parents, and haircutting for male mourners is still generally prohibited.

The fifth and last stage is the 12-month period (which includes the *sheloshim*) during which things return to normal, and business once again becomes routine, but the inner feelings of the mourner are still wounded by the rupture of his relationship with a parent. The pursuit of entertainment and amusement is curtailed. At the close of this last stage, the 12-month period, the bereaved is not expected to continue his mourning, except for brief moments when *yizkor* or *yahrtzeit* is observed. In fact, our tradition rebukes a man for mourning more than this prescribed period.

In this magnificently conceived, graduated process of mourning an ancient faith raises up the mourner from the abyss of despair to the undulating hills and valleys of normal daily life.

Text 8: The Mourner's *Kaddish*. Recited for 11 month from the date of burial.

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

The Mourner's *Kaddish* performs two pragmatic functions : 1) It blends in with the internal spirit of the mourner, imperceptibly healing his psychological wounds, and 2) it teaches the mourner vital and profound lessons about life and death and the conquest of evil. It is therefore no accident of spiritual history that the *Kaddish* has become so important to those stricken with grief, and that, in the course of time, it became the hallmark of bereavement.

Text 9: Ivan G. Marcus, *Rites of Memorialization*. The annual observance of *yahrtzeit*.