

TAHARA

The

Final

Act

of

Loving

Kindness



Jewish law and custom provide guidance for every life-cycle event: birth, bar/bat mitzvah, marriage and death. It is especially important at the end of life, when emotions may cloud one's judgment, to know that Jewish law imbues this milestone with spiritual significance that protects the dignity of the deceased.

The process of preparing the deceased for burial is called taharah, or purification. It is conducted by the Jewish burial society, a group of community volunteers called the Chevra Kadisha, or holy brotherhood. A tahara should be requested when funeral arrangements are made.

The Jewish Perception of Death

In order to understand the laws and customs of Jewish funeral practices, we must first understand the Jewish perception of death.

In life, a person is an integrated whole, composed of body and soul. The soul, while not visible, is nevertheless the essence, the feelings and the personality, contained within the living body.

At death, the two parts are separated. The body is respectfully buried, while the soul, the *neshama*, prepares to enter Eternity. We believe that the *neshama* remains near the body until burial.

Our treatment of the deceased is governed by the principle of *kovod ha met*, respect for the body. Just as the ark in a synagogue acquires holiness from the Torah within it, so does the human body become a holy vessel because it contains the soul, a spark of the Divine in every person. Accordingly, Judaism requires that we uniquely respect the body of the deceased in our every action.

Believing that the soul maintains consciousness after death, the *Chevra Kadisha* comforts it by reciting Psalms, and protects the dignity of the body by providing a *shomer* — an around-the-clock honor guard — until burial.



The Burial Society

Preparation of the deceased for burial is entrusted to the *Chevra Kadisha*. Throughout Jewish history, serving on the *Chevra Kadisha* has been a great honor. These men and women, selected for their character, integrity and personal devotion, are volunteers who are specially trained to perform a *tabara*. Working in teams, these men or women, depending on the gender of the deceased, are always on call to fulfill their duties.

Entrusting preparation to the *Chevra Kadisha* insures the highest level of sensitivity and dignity in conformity with Jewish law and custom.

Preparation for Burial

As death is the end of the cycle of life, funeral rituals reflect those of birth. Thus, just as a newborn is washed and dressed, the deceased is carefully washed and dressed by members of the *Chevra Kadisha*.

The deceased is made ready to enter the world to come by ritual purification. He or she is dressed in white linen. Finally, the body is gently lowered into the casket wrapped in a linen sheet, and the casket is closed.

Embalming and cremation are prohibited by Jewish law.

Prayer

Throughout the *tabara*, special prayers are recited that relate to the tasks of preparing the body. These prayers draw upon the Torah, Prophets and the Song of Songs. At several points, they refer to the deceased by his or her Hebrew name, and that of his or her father. For this reason, it is important to provide the funeral chapel with these names, if they are known.

In the opening prayer, before the *tabara* begins, the deceased is introduced to G-d:

רבונו של עולם

Master of the universe! Have compassion for _____, son/daughter of _____, this deceased, for he/she is a descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, your servants....Through mercy, hide and disregard the transgressions of this departed, Your servant....May he/she tread with righteous feet into the Garden of Eden, for that is the place of the upright, and G-d protects the pious.

The sections that follow, describing the *tabara* procedures, include selections from the accompanying prayers.

Washing and Purification

ויען ויאמר

...And the angel of G-d raised his voice...saying, "Remove the soiled garments from him," and said to him, "Behold, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I will clothe you in fine garments."

Zechariah 3:4

The deceased is washed and dried. Fingernails and toenails are cleaned, and jewelry, identification tags, bandages etc. are removed. After being washed, the deceased is ritually purified through immersion in running water. This is similar to the *mikvah*, or purification bath, that was required of worshippers entering the Temple in Jerusalem. If the funeral chapel does not have a *mikvah* pool, the purification requires a cascade of water to be poured over the body.

וזרקתי עליכם מים טהורים

...I will pour upon you pure water and you will be purified of all your defilements, and from all your abominations I will purify you

Ezekiel 36:25

Dressing

תגל נפשי

My soul shall be joyful in my G-d, for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation. He has covered me with the robe of righteousness as a bridegroom puts on priestly glory, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

Isaiah 61:10

When the body has been rendered ritually clean, it is carefully dressed in special clothing called *tachrichim*, shrouds of white linen. The same shrouds are used for all *tabaras*, in recognition of the equality of all before G-d. The *tachrichim* used for both men and women, consist of a head covering, shirt, trousers, coat and belt. They are patterned after the outfit worn by the High Priest in the Holy Temple on Yom Kippur. The *tachrichim* are hand-sewn, and have no pockets, signifying that the deceased carries no worldly goods to the grave.

After a man has been dressed in the shrouds, his *tallit*, prayer shawl, is placed around his shoulders. If possible, family should bring this *tallit* to the funeral chapel. If not, one will be provided.

The Casket

וְהוּא רַחוּם

And He, being compassionate, forgives iniquity and does not allow destruction to set in, and many a time takes back his anger, and never lets all His wrath be stirred.

Psalms 78:58

Jewish law requires that the body be allowed to return to the earth as speedily as possible: "For dust thou art and to dust you shall return" (Gen. III, 19). Therefore, the casket must be made entirely of wood, with a few holes in the bottom to hasten the body's natural decomposition. In keeping with the concept of equality in death, the simplest wood casket is most appropriate.

When the body is settled in the casket, shards of pottery are placed on the eyes and mouth as a symbolic reminder of human frailty. Soil from Israel is sprinkled in the casket and over the shrouded body, a concrete connection with the land of our ancestors. The deceased is wrapped in a large linen sheet and the casket is closed. Before closing the casket, the *tabara* team addresses the deceased:

אנו מבקשים

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_____, son/daughter of _____, we ask forgiveness of you if we did not treat you respectfully, but we acted in accordance with our custom. May you be an advocate for all of Israel. Go in peace, rest in peace, and arise in your turn at the end of days.

The casket is then closed and each person on the team offers a silent personal prayer for the departed.

The closed casket should not be reopened. It is considered disrespectful and undignified to disturb the preparations that have been made by the *Chevra Kadisha* and therefore the practice of viewing the deceased is forbidden by Jewish law.





Burial

Finally, the body in its wood casket is taken to the cemetery for burial. After interment the *neshama* is completely free of the body and returns to Heaven. As the prophet says, “The dust returns to the earth and the spirit returns to G-d who gave it.”

Jewish law requires burial as soon as possible after death to facilitate the immediate beginning of its return to earth. For this reason, above-ground mausoleums are prohibited. In accordance with Jewish law, the body is buried in the earth, with family and friends participating in the final rite of filling in the grave.

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