

Death in Judaism comes at its allotted time by God and is a natural part of life. Structured periods of mourning and ritual behaviour are designed to give respect for the dead, comfort to the living, and to channel grief.

If a person is dying there may be an attempt to make their last words the Shema:

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, The Lord is One, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6: 4-5)

This is like the Muslim who hears the Shahadah (one God, Muhammad his prophet) just before death, if possible.

When at first notice of a death comes, a parent of the deceased **may tear clothing** across their heart and others on the right hand side. A **blessing** is recited of God as the true judge because God takes life. No one eats or drinks near the dead because the dead cannot do these things and daily and **positive commandments are put aside by relatives** carrying out preparations. Ordinary prayer requirements get excused. The dead person's eyes are closed. The Burial Society cleans, washes (like Muslims do) and dries the body. It is put in plain white garments. It is placed on the floor and candles are lit very close by. Here a simple coffin may be used (there is equality in death; Islamic practice stresses equality but by refusing a coffin unless the law states otherwise). Someone stays with the body. Ahead of the burial the coffin is closed to protect the deceased from bad comments by enemies. **Holes** are drilled into a coffin to ensure contact with the earth.

The family is left alone to grieve until after the funeral. That the body is ritually impure means hands are washed before entering a home whether the body has been touched or not.

The body remains very important to Jewish faith, as it is the body that will be resurrected on the last day from the grave (Islam too says the dead will find their bodies on the last day). Thus autopsies are frowned upon unless these would save a life or law demands one. Orthodox Jews will have a **burial** (not cremation, and again Islam agrees). Burial should come quickly after death. Psalms are read, the rabbi speaks, the body/ coffin is lowered and

soil dropped upon it (as Christians do in a burial). There is, or will be, a **gravestone** to remember the person, which may be veiled or delayed for a year. When erected or unveiled there is a **ceremony**. Separdim gravestones are horizontal, Ahkenazim are vertical. The gravestone might have Jewish symbols on it. Using abbreviated Hebrew the grave script says, "*Here lies*", then (still all in Hebrew) the person's name, "*son of*" / "*daughter of*" whoever, the person's title, and the date (Hebrew letters) of death. The last abbreviated Hebrew text hopes the person is in the bond of eternal life.

After the funeral near neighbours or relatives prepare *se'udat havra'ah* (the **meal of condolence**) for the family alone consisting of hard boiled eggs (with no opening eggs represent the inability to speak, and also life) and bread. Only at this point on can **people visit the family**, waiting for the mourner to talk first and who must focus gentle conversation on the deceased. Every day in front of at least ten men (minyan) the mourner (like the son) states the Kaddush prayer:

May His great Name grow exalted and sanctified in the world that He created as He willed. May He give reign to His kingship in your lifetimes and in your days...

This shows that the deceased person had done well to raise someone who, at a time of such deep sorrow, demonstrates faith in God. When visitors leave they say :

May the Lord comfort you with all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.

The close family have started **shiva** (seven) which goes on until the morning of the seventh day after burial. A candle burns day and night. Mirrors are covered or turned around. They wear the clothes worn when the person died, sit on low stools or the floor, leave off leather shoes, do not shave or cut hair, ignore cosmetics, stay off work, and avoid pleasure. The only Torah studied relates to mourning and grief. People pray with the family.

Festivals have priority over mourning and either delay or suspend it. At the Sabbath the mourning dress code is suspended whilst people mourn privately.

Then comes **shloshim** (thirty, until the 30th day after burial) which basically

means no celebratory or entertaining events, still no shaving or hair cutting, and no musical entertainment.

A parent of the dead observes **avelut for a year** after the burial, meaning no celebratory or entertaining events. **For eleven months from the burial the Kaddish** is recited by the offspring every day. It is just eleven because the most evil person needs 12 months to enter the next world spiritually pure, and no one's parent is that evil!

Then mourning must stop, except for an **anniversary** death service (**Yahrzeit**) when sons recite Kaddish and bless the Torah in the synagogue if available, and all the mourners light a candle each that burns for a day to honour the deceased. Also, during services on **Yom Kippur**, **Shemini Atzeret** (last day of Passover) and **Shavu'ot** close relatives recite the mourner's prayer Yizkor. Yahrzeit (anniversary) candles are also lit on these days.

Jews believe that heaven is reserved for God and the angels. Elijah rose to heaven and can return when salvation comes and there are a few others who went there, but going to heaven is not a feature of Orthodox Judaism. Gehenna is a hellish place of punishment, but God may not punish eternally. Thus it is on this earth that bodies shall be raised when the last day comes.

Questions 1. Write a short poem on death including a Jewish element.



2. Starting with the death, and ending a year later, draw a broken circle and at key points describe the mourning process. At the start of the curve going clockwise draw a figure lying on the ground, and at the end draw a gravestone with Hebrew writing. In a space refer to anniversaries and synagogue events.

3. Write the opposite of the Shema. Then pass this on. Then write the opposite to whatever is received. Then pass that on. Then write the opposite to whatever was received. Then pass it on. Write the opposite again! Read!

4. Is it a good idea to have structured mourning? Give reasons for your answer.