Death, Funerals and Mourning

Jewish Beliefs about Life and Death

In Judaism, life is valued above almost everything else. Jews believe all people are descended from a single person - everyone is linked together.

Judaism not only allows but requires a person to break the commandments if necessary to save a life. A person who is extremely ill, for example, or a woman in labour, is not permitted to fast on Yom Kippur, because fasting at such a time would endanger the person's life. Doctors are permitted to answer emergency calls on the Sabbath, even though this may violate many Sabbath prohibitions. Abortions where necessary to save the life of a mother are allowed (the unborn are not considered human life in Jewish law, therefore the mother's human life overrides).

Because life is so valuable, Jews are not permitted to do anything that may speed up death, not even to prevent suffering. Euthanasia or suicide are strictly forbidden by Jewish law. However, where death is imminent and certain, and the patient is suffering, Jewish law does allow doctors to stop artificially prolonging life. Therefore, Jewish law permits refusing extraordinary means of prolonging life.

In Judaism, death is not a tragedy, even when it occurs early in life or through unfortunate circumstances. Death is a natural process. Our deaths, like our lives, have meaning and are all part of G-d's plan.

Jews have a strong belief in an afterlife, a world to come, where those who have lived a good life will be rewarded and the evil punished. The Torah is very vague on the subject and mainly talks about 'Sheol', a shadowy underworld where the souls of the dead end up. Sheol is sometimes compared to Hell, but Jews don't believe in Sheol as a place of everlasting torment - it's a place where souls are cleaned up to make them fit for an eternity spent in the presence of G-d.

Jews believe in the resurrection of the dead at the time of the messiah.

The Dying Person

Jewish families come together to be near a loved one who is dying. If possible a person should spend their last moments confessing their sins and reciting the Shema.

Mourning practices in Judaism are extensive, but they are not an expression of fear or hate for death. They have two purposes: to show respect for the dead and to comfort the living who will miss the deceased.

Care for the Dead and Funeral Preparations

- After a person dies, the eyes are closed, the body is laid on the floor and covered, and candles are lit next to the body.
• Each member of the family makes a small tear in their clothing - a symbol of grief and shock.
• The body is never left alone until after burial, as a sign of respect. The people who sit with the dead body are called shomerim ("guards" or "keepers"). Respect for the dead body is very important. For example, the shomerim may not eat, drink, or perform a commandment in the presence of the dead. To do so would be considered mocking the dead, because the dead can no longer do these things.

• Most Jewish communities have an organisation to care for the dead, known as the chevra kaddisha (the holy society). These people are volunteers. The body is sacred and autopsies in general are discouraged as desecration of the body. The presence of a dead body is considered a source of ritual impurity.

• People who have been in the presence of a body wash their hands before entering a home. This is done to symbolically remove spiritual impurity, not physical uncleanness.

• The body is washed and placed in a mikveh. It is wrapped in a simple, plain linen shroud before being placed in a plain, unpolished, wooden coffin - in death rich and poor are equal.

• The body is wrapped in a tallit (prayer shawl) and the fringes are cut off - the man is freed from keeping religious laws.

• The body must not be cremated. It must be buried in the earth. The body is never displayed at funerals - open casket ceremonies are forbidden by Jewish law.

The Funeral

A Jewish funeral is very short and simple. No flowers are given at a Jewish funeral. A service will take place in the synagogue, psalms are read and a prayer is said praising G-d for giving life and for taking it away. The rabbi might make a short speech about the deceased.

Some Sephardic Jews circle the grave seven times after the body has been placed in it. As the coffin is lowered into the grave the mourners say "May he/she come to his/her place in peace." The grave is filled in. As people leave the grave they may throw grass and earth behind them saying, 'remember that we are of dust.' People will symbolically wash their hands.

Mourning

Jewish mourning practices can be broken into several periods of decreasing intensity. These mourning periods allow the full expression of grief, while discouraging excesses of grief and allowing the mourner to gradually return to a normal life.
After the burial, a close relative or friend prepares a meal for the mourners (meal of condolence). This meal traditionally consists of eggs (a symbol of life) and bread.

From the time of death until the body is buried a mourner is known as an onan (immediate mourner). After the burial the mourner is avel - a prolonged mourner.

Shiva (seven) - The First Week of Mournning

Shiva is observed by parents, children, spouses and siblings of the deceased, preferably all together in the deceased's home. Shiva begins on the day of burial and continues until the morning of the seventh day after burial.

Mourners sit on low stools or the floor instead of chairs, do not wear leather shoes, do not shave or cut their hair, do not wear make-up or work. Also they do not do things for comfort or pleasure such as bathe, listen to music, shave, have sex, put on fresh clothing, or study Torah (except Torah related to mourning and grief). Mirrors in the house are covered.

Men recite Kaddish - a prayer. Everyone is encouraged to talk about the person who has died.

Sheloshim (thirty) - The First Month

During this period mourners do not attend parties or celebrations, do not shave or cut their hair, or listen to music.

Life returns gradually returns to normal. Anyone who has lost a parent remains in mourning for a whole year.

For the next 11 months (Shanah) Kaddish is said everyday. After this the dead person is remembered each year on the anniversary of their death by the lighting of a yahrzeit (anniversary) candle which burns for a full day and by the reciting of the kaddish.

Also during services on Yom Kippur, the last day of Passover, and Shavu'ot, after the reading in synagogue, close relatives recite the mourner’s prayer, Yizkor (“May He remember...”) in synagogue. Yahrzeit candles are also lit on those days.

Just before the anniversary of the death, the tombstone will be placed at the grave. Sometimes there is an unveiling ceremony. When people visit a Jewish grave they do not take flowers but instead place a small stone on the gravestone as a sign of respect.