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"Leveiya": The process of the Jewish Funeral Service

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"I have been interested in religion for most of my life. Attending a private Catholic elementary school, high school, and now a college in the Catholic tradition has helped to fuel this interest. I am a Roman Catholic, so naturally I know a great deal about my own religion, but the religions that I like to learn about the most are those other than my own. I find the many different religions and the different aspects within the religions fascinating."

“Leveiya”:
The process of the Jewish Funeral Service

by

Jennifer Hitchcock

Introduction

I have been interested in religion for most of my life. Attending a private Catholic elementary school, high school, and now a college in the Catholic tradition has helped to fuel this interest. I am a Roman Catholic, so naturally I know a great deal about my own religion, but the religions that I like to learn about the most are those other than my own. I find the many different religions and the different aspects within the religions fascinating.

One of the religions that I am most interested in, other than my own, is Judaism. Since Christianity arose from Judaism I do know a good deal about its history and some of the beliefs. I also have many friends who are Jewish, and they have explained numerous aspects of the religion to me. The main ideas focusing on their rites of passage, exactly like they were named in our book: circumcision, Bar (Bas) Mitzvah, marriage, and burial. (Monk, 38)

Unfortunately, a person very close to me died in the not so distant past, and she was Jewish. I attended the funeral service, but knew little of what was going on, or what different items symbolized or meant. I chose to write this paper on Jewish funerals, preparing for them, the actual service, and what happens after the person is buried, because I found it very interesting to observe what was going on around me, but I had no idea what anything meant. Therefore, this paper will help me further my knowledge of Judaism and one of its rites of passage, and it will also help me to answer many of the questions that I have about the Jewish funeral.

Directly following death

Once a Jewish person dies, there are many rituals that must be taken care of in order to give the deceased the respect he or she deserves. When a person dies, someone close to the deceased, whether it be a relative or close friend, must close the eyes and mouth of the deceased and pull a sheet over his or her head. All of the mirrors in the house should be covered to avoid personal vanity in times of tragedy and also to lessen the over-concern that many place on appearance. Another reason for the mirrors to be covered is to take emphasis away from the beauty of a person's flesh at a time when another person's body has begun the process of decay in the same house. (Habenstein, 194; Lamm, 4)

From the moment a person dies until the burial the deceased can not be left alone. A "shomer," or watcher, must be at his or her side at all times. This shomer is to sit with the deceased and recite portions of the Book of Palms. But, while in the room with the deceased, there may be no eating, drinking or smoking in his or her presence. (Lamm, 5)

Finally the rabbi should be called so that he can notify the "Chevra Kadisha," or Burial Society, to take care of the remains. The funeral director should also be called to arrange for the removal of the body. (Lamm, 5)

Preparing the Body

The preparation of the body of the deceased is a religious ritual called "Taharah," or purification, that is performed by the Chevra Kadisha. All Jews are to be buried in the same type of garment, whether they are rich or poor, it doesn't matter, because they are all equal in the eyes of God. The deceased person is to be dressed in something

completely clean and white, yet it must be simple and handmade, symbolizing purity, simplicity and dignity. (Prothero)

The body is placed in a coffin that must be made completely of wood. This coffin does not need to be ornately decorated, simplicity is actually better when it comes to this. The interior of the coffin may be lined, bedded and pillowed, or just left bare. Earth from the Holy Land is often buried with the deceased. (Prothero; Lamm, 16)

The Funeral Service

According to Jewish law, the deceased must be buried within twenty-four hours following his or her death. There are of course exceptions to this, such as if very close relatives (children or parents) have to come from far distances, or if the “leveiya” or funeral is to occur on a major Jewish holiday it will be postponed until the second day of the feast. This is because Jewish law forbids Jews to bury their dead on the first day of a holiday. (Lamm, 19)

There are three different places where Jewish funerals are normally held: the home of the deceased, the cemetery, and the funeral chapel in the funeral home (the first two dating back much further than the third). The synagogue is sometimes used as well, but this is rare. (Lamm, 37)

The service itself is a very simple and brief service for the honor and dignity of the deceased. A eulogy is given, usually by the rabbi that highlights the worthy values that he or she lived by, the good deeds that were performed, and the noble aspects of his or her character. Also during the service there is a reading that is selected from the book

of Psalms that relates to the life of the deceased and a Memorial Prayer asking that God take care of his or her soul. (Lamm, 45)

Burial

All Jews must be buried. God said to Adam “For dust thou are and to dust shalt thou return” and this is taken very seriously in Judaism. Cremation of a Jewish person is never permitted; they must be bodily in the earth. In the case of mausoleums the deceased must be buried in the ground, the casket can not be left above the earth. It is acceptable for the deceased to be buried in the ground and for the mausoleum to be built around that plot of land, but the buried person cannot be above the ground. (Habenstein, 193; Bowman, 119, 167)

Family or friends of the Jewish faith should comprise the pallbearers that carry the casket and deposit it in the grave. There is a procession to the burial site in which several pauses are made; seven pauses are used in most communities. These pauses are used for a person in the procession to reflect on his or her own self. All of the people in this procession, except the rabbi, walk behind the casket and Psalm 91 is recited. (Lamm, 60)

Immediately before (or in some cases immediately following) the lowering of the casket, the “tzidduk ha’din,” or justification of the divine decree, is recited. The casket is then lowered into the ground and the grave is filled. The Burial Kaddish, a prayer that tells of the hope that there is a future for the deceased is recited after the grave is filled with earth. (Lamm, 63-64)

Shiva and Sheloshim

Shiva is the process of mourning that begins directly after the burial, when the casket is completely covered. The mourners walk between two lines of friends and family and are comforted by them. They then go directly to the home, where shiva is to be observed; there, they remove their shoes and sit on a low bench or stool. This marks the first of the seven days of shiva. Shiva ends on the morning of the seventh day after burial. The people present with the mourners offer their condolences, and the mourners come out of their week of mourning. (Lamm, 88)

Shiva is to be observed in the house of the deceased because evidence of his or her life should be present. Mourners can commute from their own home to the house of the shiva, or they can sit shiva in their own home. The “sitting” part of shiva comes from the idea of being close to the earth. It is recommended that the mourner sit on a low stool, or even on the ground on a mat or pillows. The main regulations that must be upheld by the mourners during shiva are that they must sit on a low stool; they should remain indoors (at least until it is night and dark out); they must abstain from marital relation; they may not work; and they also may not study the Torah. There are other aspects of shiva that also apply to the period of mourning called sheloshim. These aspects are the prohibition of forms of vanity such as haircutting, shaving, nail cutting, bathing (for pleasure), and wearing new clothes, getting married, and attending parties. (Lamm, 145)

Sheloshim is the thirty day period of mourning that starts from the date when the deceased is buried. And it ends the morning of the thirtieth day after the burial. It is

basically an extension of the shiva, but not to the same extent of mourning that is expressed during the shiva.

Conclusion

Of course these observances and rituals of a Jewish burial are somewhat flexible and not always carried out this exact way. However, these are the general and most commonly used rites and ideas that are used for a Jewish funeral and burial.

Some of the very Orthodox Jews adhere strictly to the exact ways of the past and have in no way conformed to the present American society in regards to funerals. For these types of funerals you will see no or very little difference in the funerals of today and the very first funerals in Judaism. While other less Orthodox Jews have adopted some aspects of current culture and different American ways.

I learned so much in writing this paper about the rituals and observances held during a Jewish funeral. I never knew that so much went into the preparation process, and how long the mourning period was. As I said in the introduction, while attending a Jewish funeral I was unaware of what was occurring around me, but now I know what happened and the reasons for each action that took place. In writing this paper I expanded my knowledge of the Jewish religion and one of its rites of passage through life, the final rite of passage, but an obviously important one.

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