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Rabbi Meir sat in the House of Study and preached one Sabbath afternoon. While he was there, his two sons died. His wife, Beruria, laid them on their beds, and covered them with a linen sheet. After sunset, Rabbi Meir returned, and made the blessings over the outgoing of the Sabbath.

'Meir, I have a question to ask you,' said Beruria. 'Someone came and deposited some precious articles here; today he came and asked for their return – should I give them to him?' 'Of course!' replied Meir.

At that, she took his hand and led him to the room where his sons lay. Meir burst into tears. 'The Lord gives and the Lord taketh away; Blessed be the name of the Lord.'

(*Midr. Prov.* XXXI, 10)

'Death' as an abstract concept is not a theological 'problem' in Judaism. We see death as part of the destiny of the individual, one stage on a 'Path of Life'.

Rabbi Jacob said: This world is like a vestibule before the world to come; prepare yourself in the vestibule, so that you may enter the banquet hall. (*Mishnah Avot* 4:21)

Yet Judaism recognises fully the traumatic loss which each death represents to the living community; and Jewish customary law (*Halakhah*) has evolved a hierarchy of mourning patterns which serve to cushion the mourners through the several stages of their grief. In themselves, the patterns of mourning reflect Jewish attitudes to death and the dying.

Judaism traditionally does not begin with the formulation of a philosophy and on that basis proceed to decide upon consequent modes of action . . . The primary Jewish task is to obey God by practising the commandments. The attitudes that inform them will thereby eventually and inevitably become one's own. By living and studying the *Halakhah* one

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gradually discovers and absorbs the theological and moral sources upon which it is based. The method is inductive rather than deductive. (*The Good Society: Jewish Ethics in Action*, N. Lamm, Viking Press USA)

### *Preparation for death*

When a sick person realises their life is ebbing away, they recite the 'Confession on the death bed' (*viddui*).

This short Hebrew prayer:

acknowledges that cure and death are in the hands of God; asks for healing, but accepts the possibility of death; requests that death should atone for sins committed during life; asks for length of years for the relatives of the dying person; asks that, in the event of death, God should 'convey to me something of the great goodness stored up for the righteous – make known to me the path of everlasting life – for in your presence is complete joy, and happiness is always at your right hand.'

The words of the monotheistic declaration (*She'ma*) 'Hear, Israel, the Lord our God is one God' are the last words of the dying person. A Jewish legend states that the last sigh of a dying man reverberates from one end of the world to the other.

It is forbidden to hasten the death of a dying person under any circumstances; but, in the case of a life which is ending in dignity at its full span, neither need unnecessary steps be taken to prolong life. In other cases, however, every effort must be made to preserve life. Every law, custom or tradition must be disregarded in circumstances when they represent – in even the remotest way – an impediment to the saving of human life.

### *The Soul*

The moment of death is referred to in Jewish sources as the 'Time of the departure of the soul' (*Sha'at yetziat ha-neshamah*). Judaism believes that the soul of a person ascends to a 'World to come' (*Olam Ha'ba*). The soul, (*Nefesh, Neshamah* or *Ruach*) is an integral component of every human being. The soul existed before creation; according to Jewish mystic tradition, they were present at Mount Sinai to witness the revelation; given by God, they return to him at the death of the body.

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The daily liturgy states:

My God, the soul which you have placed within me is pure. You have created it; you have formed it; you have breathed it into me. You preserve it within me, you will take it from me, and restore it to me in the hereafter. So long as the soul is within me, I offer thanks before you, Lord my God and God of my fathers, Master of all creatures, Lord of all souls. Blessed are you, O Lord, who restores the souls to the dead.

### *Death: the community's responsibility*

Among the main organisations of every Jewish community is the 'Holy Fraternity' (*Hevra Kadisha*). This is a voluntary group, membership of which is considered an honour and a holy duty, whose task it is to supervise and carry out all rites and arrangements connected with death and burial. The task of dealing with death devolves on the entire community; all work must stop until satisfactory arrangements are made for according the correct dignity to the body of a person who has just died. The members of the *Hevra Kadisha* are responsible for acquiring and maintaining cemeteries; attending to the dead; carrying out funerals and looking after the mourners.

Although many communities still maintain an entirely voluntary *Hevra Kadisha*, nowadays many of its duties are carried out by professionals. However, burial in Jewish cemeteries is always by Burial Societies of the Jewish community – whether honorary or professional – on an entirely non-commercial basis.

### *Burial*

After the 'departure of the soul' the bodily remains must be treated with great respect. The body is not left alone, by day or night, until the funeral. It is invariable Jewish practice that the funeral takes place as soon as possible after death – usually within 24 hours. Before the funeral, the body is thoroughly washed (*Taharah*, literally purification) by the members of the *Hevra Kadisha*. No embalming, preservative, or cosmetic of any sort is permitted to be used on the corpse. It is dressed in simple white garments, and buried in a plain, unembellished and unvarnished wooden coffin. The burial service is short,

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lasting approximately half-an-hour, and normally includes an eulogy (*Hesped*). It begins with the declaration:

The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are judgment, a God of faith, without iniquity; just and upright is He . . .

The dominant themes of the Burial service are:

- (i) the recognition of God as the 'True Judge' (*Dayan Emet*)
- (ii) the cycle of man's life:

As for man, his days are as grass, as the flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it and it is gone – it is no longer known in its place.

- (iii) an extremely powerful expression of belief in the progress of the soul:

O Lord, who is full of compassion, who dwells on high, God of forgiveness, who is merciful, slow to anger and abounding in loving kindness, grant pardon of transgressions, nearness of salvation, and perfect rest beneath the shadow of your divine presence, in the exalted places among the holy and pure, who shine as the brightness of the firmament, to . . . who has gone to his/her eternal home. We beseech you, O Lord of compassion, remember unto him/her for good all the meritorious and pious deeds which he/she wrought while on earth. Open unto him/her the gates of righteousness and light, the gates of pity and grace. O shelter him/her for evermore under the cover of your wings; and let his/her soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life. The Lord is his/her eternal inheritance; may he/she rest in peace. And let us say, Amen.

### *Afterlife*

Jewish teaching has always maintained that since no human can possibly know the nature of life after death, speculation on the form it takes is pointless, and is actively discouraged. Yet there is a quite definite belief in the Afterlife, and in reward and punishment. Jewish thinking, generally speaking, does not suggest 'Heaven and Hell'; rather that the righteous will enjoy

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nearness to God in the world to come, sitting before him and imbibing the Divine Radiance; but the less righteous will have only a more distant experience. Belief in the continuance of life is underlined by the constant use of terms meaning 'life' for concepts associated with death. The cemetery, for example, is known in Judaism as 'the House of Life' (*Bet Hahayyim*). The World to come is a finite period which will end with the End of Days and the Revival of the Dead.

### *Mourning*

Close relatives of the deceased – spouse, parents, children, brothers and sisters – are considered mourners. Comforting of the mourner (*Nihum Avelim*) is considered in Judaism as one of the primary social duties. There are four periods of mourning:

- (a) *From death until burial*: During this period the mourner is known as an *Onen*. He/she should spend this time arranging the preparations for the funeral; the *Onanim* (plural) are exempt from certain religious obligations (e.g. regular prayer). During this time the mourner is not comforted: 'Rabbi Simeon ben Elazar said: ". . . do not comfort your fellow while his dead lies before him . . ."' (*Mishnah Avot* 4:23)

At the commencement of the funeral the mourners tear one of their garments – this act of mourning is known as *Kriah* (tearing).

- (b) *The Shiva*: For seven days after the funeral, the close relatives gather daily at the house of mourning. They sit on low chairs, and family, friends and neighbours come to offer them comfort and condolence. Daily prayers, including special prayers in memory of the deceased are said. During the period of the *Shiva* (literally seven) deep mourning is observed. The mourners may not shave, have their hair cut, go to work, or prepare food for themselves.
- (c) *Shaloshim*: For a further three weeks (until *Shaloshim*, thirty days after the funeral) personal mourning is observed. The mourner may go to work, but should avoid, if possible, shaving and haircuts; no new clothes may be worn, nor may the mourner listen to any music or take part in any celebration.

Mourners have the privilege of reciting a particular piece

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of the liturgy – the *Kaddish* (see below) – at all public prayers that they attend. Most Jewish people see the observance of this privilege as a duty – and will make every effort to attend synagogue services during their period of mourning.

- (d) *From Shaloshim to first Yahrzeit*: The full period of mourning, observed for parents and children, is one year from the date of death. *Kaddish* is said for eleven months; and during this time the *Avelim* (mourners) still observe certain patterns of mourning. The tombstone may be erected and consecrated at any time from the end of the *Shaloshim*, but not normally later than the first *Yahrzeit* (anniversary of death, from Yiddish). Each year the *Yahrzeit* is marked by reciting *Kaddish*, lighting a memorial candle and performing some righteous act.

### *Kaddish*

This prayer is one of the best known parts of the Jewish liturgy. Although used for different purposes originally, for centuries now, one variant of it, the 'Mourners Kaddish' has been used exclusively for recitation by mourners in the synagogue. It is said in its original language, Aramaic. It is neither a prayer for the dead nor to the dead, but a powerful assertion by a mourner who has encountered death at close quarters of faith in the Creator, ending with a plea for peace.

Glorified and sanctified be God's great name throughout the world which he has created according to his will. May he establish his kingdom in your lifetime and during your days, and within the life of the entire house of Israel, speedily and soon; and say, *Amen*.

May his great name be blessed forever and to all eternity.

Blessed and praised, glorified and exalted, extolled and honoured, adored and lauded be the name of the Holy One, blessed be he, beyond all the blessings and hymns, praises and consolation that are ever spoken in the world; and say, *Amen*.

May there be abundant peace from heaven, and life, for us and for all Israel; and say, *Amen*.

He who creates peace in his celestial heights, may he create peace for us and for all Israel; and say, *Amen*.