

FROM THE MOMENT OF DEATH TO THE FUNERAL SERVICE

with the soul-wound of our own loss and let the world manage for itself?

Thousands of years of our rich tradition provide us with direction during these moments of crisis. The accumulated wisdom of the ages is a source of great consolation.

In the pages that follow, you will find clear guidelines that the Jewish tradition has laid down to lead mourners through the complex maze of uncertainties and ambivalence that attend the tragic moment. The ache of the heart will not suddenly disappear. There will be no miraculous consolation. But Judaism does teach the aching heart how to express its pain in love and respect, and how to achieve the eventual consolation, which will restore us to humanity and keep us from vindictiveness and self-pity.

INITIAL CARE OF THE DECEASED

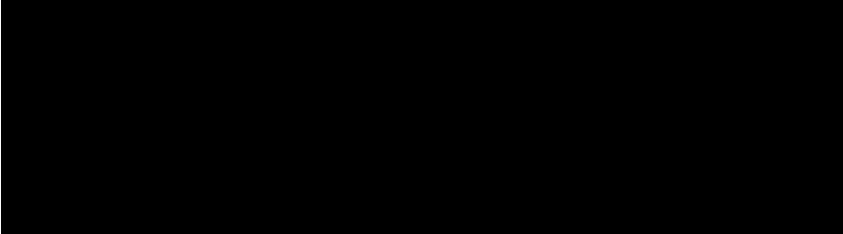


The principle governing the care of the body immediately following death is the sacredness of man. A human being is equated with a Torah scroll that is impaired and can no longer be used at religious services. While the ancient scroll no longer serves any useful ritual purpose, it is revered for the exalted function it once filled. Man is created in the image of God, and, although the pulse of life is no more, the human form must be respected for having once embodied the spirit of God and for the character and the personality it housed. The manner of respect is governed and detailed by religious tradition rather than by personal sentiment and whim. The following are some of the basic guidelines for the care of the deceased at the time of death:

1. During the last minutes of life, no one in the presence of the deceased may leave, except those whose emotions are uncontrollable or the physically ill. It is a matter of the greatest respect to watch over a person as he passes from this world to the next.
2. After death has been ascertained, the children or friends

THE JEWISH WAY IN DEATH AND MOURNING

or relatives must close the eyes and the mouth of the deceased and draw a sheet over his face.



4. The position of the body should be oriented so that the feet face the doorway. Other than this, the deceased should not be touched or moved, except for his own honor (such as straightening the body if it is found in an awkward position, or moving it if it has been found in environs not considered sufficiently respectful). Some Orthodox Jews retain the custom of placing the body on the floor approximately twenty minutes after death and pouring water on the floor as a sign to friends and neighbors that a death has occurred.

5. A candle should be placed near the head of the deceased. According to some customs, many candles should be placed all around the person.

6. A beautiful and moving custom calls upon relatives and friends to ask forgiveness of the deceased at this time for any harm or discomfort they might have caused him during his lifetime.

7. The mirrors in the entire house are covered to de-emphasize the beauty and the ornamentation of the flesh at a time when, in the same house, another person's body has begun to decay. Mirrors also are covered to avoid personal vanity during moments of tragedy and to diminish the usual over-concern with one's appearance. Another explanation of this custom is that the image of God, reflected in the mirror, has been diminished by the recent death. This subject is considered in greater detail below.

8. Psalms 23 and 91 are recited. The text and commentary are found in Appendix One.

9. Personal behavior in the room of the deceased should be consonant with the highest degree of respect for his person. There may be no eating, drinking, or smoking in his pres-

ence. Outside the room proper, however, these are permitted. No derogatory remarks about the deceased may be voiced, even though, objectively, they may be true. Discussion in the room should concentrate solely on the deceased and his personal qualities, or on the funeral arrangements. There should be no singing or playing of music or even words of Torah.

10. The rabbi should be called. He will notify the *chevrah kaddisha* (burial society), which will care for the remains. Then the funeral director, who will arrange for the local attending doctor to provide the death certificate and for the removal of the body, should be called.

11. From the moment of death until burial, the deceased may not be left alone. Therefore, the family must arrange for a person called a *shomer* (watcher), whether it be male or female, to be at his side at all times. While it is preferable for the watcher to be a member of the family or a personal friend, this is not always possible. In such cases, a person must be engaged to accompany the body and recite from the Book of Psalms. The rabbi or funeral director will be able to make such arrangements, but the mourner should ascertain clearly whether the *shomer* is reliable, for he or she must remain awake and recite Psalms all through the night. Even though the presence of the *shomer* originally was to keep rodents away from the corpse, today in mortuary freezers, such an occurrence is highly unlikely. The tradition is maintained, nonetheless, out of a desire to be overprotective and serve as the deceased's guardian. Please note that, contrary to public opinion, there are no gender restrictions in the choice of *shomer*, only considerations of integrity, spirituality, and sincerity.

12. If death occurs on the Sabbath, care should be taken not to light the Sabbath candles near the deceased. Only the most minimal arrangements may be made on the Sabbath, and these only out of respect for the dead. The dead may not be removed on the Sabbath by Jew or Gentile. A watcher should be present during the Sabbath.

If death occurs in the hospital, guidelines 4 and 5 may not be practicable, but all other customs should be observed in the hospital room and later at the funeral chapel.