Jewish Mourning & The Kaddish

by
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Mourning is not the kind of subject that many of us want to hear taught on Shabbat, or any time for that matter. We encounter it briefly when we participate in the Mourner's *Kaddish*, but even that is distressing to those of us for whom being reminded of our mortality is a downer. Nevertheless, it is not a subject we can ignore because, if we try to insulate ourselves from it, we will not be prepared either emotionally or practically, when personal loss occurs.

From its origins under Moses, Judaism has approached the subject of mourning in a biblically compassionate, yet methodical way. There is one well-known description of death and burial in Scripture that will make my point – it is that of Yeshua. We recall the intricate procedure needed to prepare Yeshua's body for Jewish burial, and the consequent rush to entomb Him before the Sabbath. We also recall the two women mourners who returned to the tomb after the Shabbat, and Yeshua's words that are recorded in Matthew 5:4 – "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

Yeshua Himself mourned for Lazarus, for in John 11:32-35 we read:

> "Then, when Miriam came where Yeshua was, and saw Him, she fell down at His feet, saying to Him, 'Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.' Therefore, when Yeshua saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled. And He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to Him, "Lord, come and see." Yeshua wept."

There are occurrences in Scripture where mourning was for a specified number of days. The *Torah* specifies that a woman captive who is about to marry an Israelite must be allowed to mourn for her father and mother for a full month (Deuteronomy 21:13), and all of Israel mourned the passing of Aaron for a similar period of time (Numbers 20:29). Also, Joseph observed seven days of mourning for his father which, even until today, remains the time that Jews "sit *shivah"* for the loss of a close relative.

It is not possible, in the space this article, to deal with all aspects of Jewish bereavement, so I will touch lightly on several, and go a little more deeply into the mourner's *Kaddish* prayer which is part of our normal Shabbat service. The snippets of Jewish tradition I am about to give you come from Orthodoxy, so it is important that you keep in mind that different communities and individuals apply them to different degrees. Ohev members have historically been quite varied in the ways they have applied these traditions, so please take this article as a call to understanding – not uniformity.

Immediately upon a person's death, his or her body is ritually washed and otherwise prepared, and burial is without delay in a plain, undecorated, wooden box (in Israel there is no box); the body is never left unattended from the time of death until the time it is lowered into the ground. A man is often buried in a plain white robe *(kittle)* and wrapped in his *Tallit* from which one fringe is removed as a reminder that it is not serving its usual purpose; there is no viewing of the

body. All of this emphasizes the equality of all persons in death; a rich man and a poor man are buried in exactly the same way. One of the several customs that illustrate this principle of equality and simplicity is not displaying flowers at the funeral, the burial site, or in a mourner's home. Burials are always beneath ground, reminiscent of how God buried Moses (Deuteronomy 34:6); cremation is not authorized in Jewish law under any circumstance.

After the burial, there is a period of seven days of "sitting *shivah,"* during which the closest family members of the deceased do not leave their homes. They wear plain dark clothing, go without shoes, sit on wooden stools, boxes, or even on the floor, and they cover all the mirrors in the house with sheets or rags to keep from being concerned by their personal appearance, lest they be tempted to make themselves attractive to guests and others. Because it is expected that the mourners will not have the heart or will to prepare their own food, it is the tradition for more distant family members, friends, and neighbors to visit and bring food in the form of both full meals for the mourners, and snacks and refreshments for guests; fruit, cakes, and nuts are common gifts. Guests often visit for hours, but do not engage the mourners in uninvited conversation.

After the seven-day *shivah* period is over, mourners typically return to their normal schedules but, in the case of the loss of a parent, a son sometimes continues in a state of mourning for a year, during the first 11 months of which, he may seek a *minion* (ten Jewish men) with whom he can pray the Mourner's *Kaddish.* At the end of one year, a gravestone or marker is unveiled and, from that time and each anniversary thereafter, the departed person is remembered by children, brothers, sisters, spouses, and parents, by lighting special *Yahrtzeit* candles and by reciting the *Kaddish.*

Visiting the grave site of a family member is also a Jewish custom and, at the time of each visit, a small stone is left on the grave as a remembrance. It is even customary for individuals who have never known the deceased to leave a stone; again, flowers are not brought or used to decorate a gravesite.

There is one tradition of remembrance with which Ohev does not comply – reciting the prayer known as *Yizkor*. The reason Ohev and most Messianic Congregations do not pray *Yizkor* is that it asks God to remember and have mercy on, the soul of a deceased person in exchange for promising to give charity on his or her behalf; clearly, this is based on unbiblical premises. Although the *Yizkor* prayer in the Joseph H. Hertz's "Daily Prayer Book" does not include the element of a charitable promise, it is still theologically problematic because it asks mercy for a deceased person for whom the deceased's heart and life data are already in God's hands.

Finally but of great importance is the *Kaddish* prayer. Next to the *Sh`ma,* the *Kaddish* is probably the best known and one of the oldest prayers of Judaism. Although there are indications that elements of it date back as far as Yeshua, one can confidently trace its origins back to the teaching institutions of the middle ages, where the teacher of Torah, speaking in Aramaic and echoing Ezekiel 38:23, would dismiss his students with a praise to God and a brief petition that He send Messiah soon. The students responded *"Amen. Y'hey shmey raba m'varakh l'alam ulamey almaya* ("Let His great name be blessed forever and forever eternally"). This response, a variation of what was originally recited in the Temple, was adopted by Jewish

mystics and, prompted by an unscriptural legend about Rabbi Akiba redeeming a soul by teaching the son of a deceased man to recite the *Kaddish*, this otherwise fine praise to God came to be used in an unbiblical way.

During the *geonic* period, the two paragraphs of the *Kaddish* beginning with *"Yitbarakh v'yishṯabach"* were added, and the Ashkenazim removed the words of Messianic hope that are still found in Separdic *siddurim:"V'yatzmach purkaney viykareyv m'shiychey. Ameyn."* ("And cause His salvation to sprout and bring near His Messiah. Amen"). Generally, when *Kaddish* is prayed at Ohev, it is the Sephardic version that is used.

The Mourner's *Kaddish* is sometimes referred to by Jewish people as a prayer for the dead. Recognizing that there is nothing in it that refers to death or dying and that praying for deceased persons is biblically indefensible, I have, for years, objected to that description of it. Recently, however, someone pointed out to me that the *Kaddish* benefits both the one who prays it and the deceased as well – the one who prays it by connecting him to his loved one's memory, and the deceased, by causing him or her to be remembered by several future generations. The identity of being a Jew is linked to generational transmission in a way that no other identity is. To that end, the *Kaddish* is the quintessential Jewish means by which we keep the memory of those who preceded us alive, and by which we are regularly reminded that we are not only individuals, but the product of those came before us, who birthed us, loved us, provided for us, and taught us.

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