



Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic An Approach to the Jewish Community for Christian Seminarians

Script 15: Jewish Views of Death and the Afterlife

While death is something Jews mention in their daily prayers – praising God for “keeping faith with those who lie in the dust” – it is definitely not a major focus of life in Judaism. Jews emphasize that what we do here in this life is what counts, that leaving a “good name” for ourselves by our actions and teachings is what matters most. Jews are very conscious of mortality, as we say in our daily morning prayers that God has breathed a soul into each of us and will take it from us someday. The Hebrew Bible uses the phrase “gathered unto his kin” in referring to the deaths of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob; or “slept with his fathers” about the deaths of King David and King Solomon. There are also numerous Biblical prohibitions about necromancers or anyone who seeks to communicate with the dead as these were pagan practices. However, it is primarily in the Jewish mystical tradition that we find detailed ideas about what happens to the soul after death.

This does not mean, however, that Jews do not believe in an afterlife of the soul. Also, Jews care a great deal about how the body is treated after death. Embalming and autopsies are prohibited except in special cases such as those mandated by local civil authorities. Since the precept of saving a human life and enhancing the quality of a life is a central principle of Jewish law, organ donation is viewed as a *mitzvah*—a positive commandment—and is supported by Jewish religious authorities, with some considering it a religious obligation..

When a person dies, traditional Jewish practice is for someone to sit near the body to honor the deceased by reciting Psalms. This takes place continuously until the burial which should ideally occur within 24 hours after death. In many situations today, this usually happens between 48-72 hours after death to allow for immediate family to arrive from various parts of the world in time for the funeral. In many traditional Jewish settings, the Burial Society of each community, known as the *Chevra Kaddisha*, takes care of the body, washing it and dressing it in a simple, white shroud and sometimes a prayer shawl. The underlying belief is that the soul of the person is still very present until the burial and the mourners are in a state of shock so it is not time yet to offer comfort to them. It is a traditional Jewish custom to use a simple, unadorned wooden casket. In Israel, the body is simply wrapped in a shroud and buried without a casket to fulfill the verse from Genesis Chapter 3, verse 19, “For dust you are and to dust you shall return.”

According to Jewish tradition, the soul returns to God who created it, and lives eternally under God's care. This realm is called *Gan Eden*, a heavenly Garden of Eden, where the soul rests in peace. There is no formal idea of Hell, though every soul is to account to God for what they have done during their life. Mystical Jewish traditions look at the mission each soul has been given and whether or not they have fulfilled this or not. What is important here is how the person is remembered by their family and friends. If they have done much evil, they may be cursed or even forgotten by their descendants. If they have done much good, their descendants will recall them with love and be inspired to follow their example and their values. Indeed, when recalling those who lived loving and upright lives, Jews might say, "May their memory be a blessing" immediately following their name.

Following a funeral, the traditional custom is for the immediate family to mourn for seven days, though many Jews today observe this intense period of mourning for fewer days. They "sit *shiva*," which means that they stay at a designated house, sitting on low furniture, and suspend all regular activities such as going to work, cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, etc. Friends and family come to visit and take care of them, quietly sitting with them and encouraging the mourners to share their grief and their memories. Morning and evening prayers are said at the house so that they do not need to leave the home and are supported in this transitional time. At the end of this period, they leave the house of mourning to walk around the block, and they can begin to return to their regular lives. Mourning continues for a period known as *sh'loshim*, the first thirty days following a funeral. While mourners return to many of their regular activities, they continue to recite the special prayer known as the Mourner's Kaddish, a sanctification of God's name, and many people refrain from going to movies, listening to music, or attending parties and other joyous occasions.

The *sh'loshim* period marks the traditional conclusion of mourning for all relatives except a parent. If a parent has died, children may go to the synagogue daily or weekly for one year to say the Kaddish prayer with other mourners, as part of the regular morning and evening prayers. Only after eleven months is it customary to put up a headstone – in a special unveiling ceremony. In general, Judaism builds in periods of mourning because it expects that it will take a person at least a year and sometimes longer to fully grieve and be able to return to a new normal in their lives after the loss of a loved one.

Each year on the anniversary of a person's death--known as a *yahrzeit*--and also on Yom Kippur and the three pilgrimage festivals of Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot, Jews light memorial candles for their loved ones and recite the Kaddish prayer. If possible, people will visit the graves of those who have died on their *yahrzeit*, say the Kaddish prayer there, and place a stone as a marker on the grave. Also, it is customary to give a monetary donation to a worthy cause in memory of their loved one or do a good deed to honor them. In this way, Jews preserve the memory of those who have gone to their eternal rest.

The belief in resurrection of the dead when the Messiah comes is a traditional Jewish belief and is found in one of the core Jewish prayers recited three times each day in the liturgy. In medieval times, Jews were always buried so that their feet would be facing Jerusalem. It was believed that when the Messiah comes, there would be a reunification of bodies and souls in the Holy Land. Many Jews today no longer affirm this belief and prayerbooks often translate and interpret traditional Hebrew prayers to reflect diverse views of life and death, body and soul.

The Jewish laws and customs of death and mourning inspire reverence and appreciation of the ancient roots and modern psychological insights of how Jewish people honor the deceased and comfort the mourners. Seminarians studying for ministry or the priesthood, and especially those embarking on careers in chaplaincy, are encouraged to broaden their understanding of Jewish views of death and the afterlife.

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