

Judaism's Original Funeral Ritual

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Traditional Jewish burial feels harsh. The thud of Earth upon the casket is more than some people can take. I've heard it called "distasteful." For decades, American Reform Jews chose to adopt their neighbors' practice. When families departed the cemetery, caskets remained above ground, left for the cemetery workers to bury.

In this week's Torah portion, we learn that the act of burial, by the family, is our people's oldest known funeral ritual. Jacob is buried by the Children of Israel. Joseph instructs his brothers to place his remains in a casket, to be carried up to be buried in the Promised Land when God delivers the Israelites from Egypt. Embalming is mentioned, but only because of Egyptian practice. The text offers us no hint of prayers. Only burial. And tears.

Much wisdom is contained in this most difficult of rites. It forces us to acknowledge the reality of death. It provides us with a tangible way to do something for the person who has died, exactly at the moment when we think we can do no more. It encourages us to recall the fragility of our own lives. And we are surprised to find that we are strong, even in the face of death.

No ceremony evokes more tears than the moments when we see the casket descend into the Earth and the first soil hits the top of the coffin. Perhaps that ritual is so difficult because it forces us to acknowledge the reality of our loved one's death. Often, we have trouble accepting that sad truth. Denial is normal, understandable, and even appropriate in the early stages of grieving. We wish that our loved one were not dead, and we are tempted to take the bait.

American funeral customs are eager to oblige. Many of us have been to viewings – the dead body embalmed, dressed, made up, and coiffed. The appropriate thing to say to the family? "She looks as though she's sleeping." Temporarily comforting, no doubt. Denial, though, is extended. We do not move on naturally to other, harder stages of mourning.

Judaism insists: Our deceased love one is not sleeping. He or she is dead. That's sad. So difficult as to be harsh. It's also true. The sooner we bust through the denial, we can experience the anger, guilt, and deepest sadness, none of

which is welcome, though all are necessary if we are to reach acceptance, moving forward in our lives.

Each person grieves differently. Some people are thrust into abject depression, crying rivers of tears. Others eagerly busy themselves with arrangements, dealing with the deceased loved one's possessions, or even cleaning the house.

That latter group are known as "instrumental mourners." Some people don't express their grief primarily emotionally. Instead, they are comforted by "doing something." Going through a departed loved one's clothes, a wrenching task for some, is therapeutic for others. Placing Earth upon the grave is the quintessential act of instrumental grieving. I'm not surprised when, from time to time, I see a family member continue to labor with the shovel for so long that some other family members or friends worry that something is wrong. Yes, something is very wrong: A loved one has died. There, at the cemetery, in the most difficult hour of experiencing our loss, Judaism gives us something to do. We can personally see to the proper burial of our loved one. We may find solace even in the wrenching task of lifting that shovel – sometimes, over and over again.

Torah teaches, *Afar atah u'l'afar tashuv*, "Dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return."ⁱ No act better exemplifies the literal accuracy of that statement than lowering the casket into a hole in the Earth and covering it with dirt. If we permit ourselves to think about the physical act we are performing, we become aware that we are facilitating the body's decomposition.

This harsh reality of the physical world imparts a key spiritual lesson. Our living bodies are composed of the same atoms that make up every living thing – trees that shed their leaves each year, cockroaches under our feet, and the salmon we may eat for dinner. How can it be, then, that we are created in the image of God, the Holy One, infinite and immortal? Our dust-ness, if you will, reminds us that we have limited time here on Earth to actualize the Divine image we are intended to bear. If we are to live in God's image – feeding the hungry, healing the sick, freeing the enslaved, and building a world of peace, filled with love – we must begin today. Standing at the edge of the grave, we would do well to imagine the moment when others will stand at our own, shoveling Earth onto our caskets. The thought is as important as it is unpleasant: Our task is urgent. Get busy on God's assignment today: Repair the world! Don't procrastinate. The deadline has not been announced, but it is coming. Before our bodies return to dust, we have work to do.

One final thought: Standing at graveside, even the most distraught mourner usually picks up that dreaded shovel. Just when we think we're at our weakest, we find the strength to undertake a physical task that isn't part of most of our daily routines. The emotional task requires even more strength than the physical one.

When we complete the reading of any book of the Torah, our tradition bids us pray: *chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek*, "Let us be strong, strong, and strengthen one another." At no point in the annual cycle of Torah readings is the blessing more appropriate than this Shabbat, at the end of Genesis. We have read of the deaths of two patriarchs. We prepare to enter a new Book, which we know will begin with our people's persecution and enslavement, even the murder of Israelite babies. We require the strength to confront the reality that the end of one generation's struggles will open the door to centuries of suffering. Similarly, when we gather the strength to shovel Earth upon a loved one's grave, we know that we are only embarking upon a new journey of grief that may require even more strength. Perhaps we should say *chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek*, when we have covered the coffin with soil.

Tonight, we say, *chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek*, for an additional reason. As we complete one Book of Torah and head into the next, we end a year on our secular calendars and prepare for another. 2017 was a year of floods and fires; a year in which we wondered whether the nuclear war that never came when it was expected during the Cold War might come instead from a North Korean madman; a year when we saw a public display of racism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism in a way that we thought had been consigned to this nation's past, and were shocked and dismayed when the President failed to respond with moral clarity. 2017 required strength. 2018 may be no different. Just as we summon the strength to pick up the shovel at graveside, we will muster the courage to face the new year's challenges. So long as we gather strength and strengthen one another.

Chazak, Chazak, V'nitchazek.

Amen.

ⁱ Genesis 3:19.