

קהילת שיר תקווה

How do we best fulfill the mitzvah of honoring our dead?

A Shir Tikvah discussion for the Days of Awe

***K'vod haMeyt* – "honoring the dead"**

Congregation Shir Tikvah is served by a number of committees which make sure that all its communal functions are carried out effectively and in ways consonant with Jewish ethics and ideals. One of these committees was originally called the Cemetery Committee; its charge was to ascertain the necessary arrangements so that Congregation Shir Tikvah will be able to bury our dead when the time comes.

Over time the committee realized that their responsibility was broader than finding a suitable piece of ground for burial plots. The Jewish ethic of *k'vod hameyt*, honoring the dead, includes several important *mitzvot* related to caring for the dead, caring for mourners, and facilitating the participation of the community in the process.

The Cemetery Committee thus changed its name to the *Kvod haMeyt* committee. The *Kvod haMeyt* Committee presents this Yom Kippur discussion toward the end of offering our congregational community the opportunity to learn about the issues related to Jewish death and burial so that we can make the best decision regarding how to fulfill this mitzvah for our members.

***Halvayat hameyt* – "accompanying the dead" to burial**

The Moment of Death

When someone dies, those who hear the news traditionally recite the blessing

ברוך אתה יהוה אלהינו מלך העולם דיין האמת
Barukh atah Adonai Eloheynu Melekh ha'Olam dayan ha'emet
Blessed are You Adonai our God, Power of the Universe, True Judge.

Those who are most affected will probably only be able to gasp out the abbreviated version:

ברוך דיין האמת
Baruch Dayan HaEmet
Blessed is the True Judge.

This is a statement of acceptance, not thanks. We affirm that this is the way the world works. People live and then they die. So will we.

Aninut

The ones who are bereaved are in the most intense state of mourning between the death and the funeral/burial. They have no obligations under Jewish law at this time. The rest of us are obligated to come to their aid in several ways:

From the moment when a person dies, Jewish tradition provides that they are not alone. Our ancestors believed that the soul hovered near the body between death and burial. It is a mitzvah, therefore, to take part in keeping the dead company until the burial. Volunteers take turns sitting by the body and reading psalms; this is called *shemirah*, "guarding".

It is a mitzvah to help to prepare the body for interment. A specially trained group called the *Hevra Kadisha*, the "holy circle", performs *taharah* (washes) and dresses the body (men attend men, women attend women); traditionally the body is wrapped in plain linen shrouds.

Death is something to which we all come equally; human equality is emphasized in a number of Jewish mitzvot related to death and burial. All should be buried in plain shrouds, in a plain wooden coffin, with a simple ceremony. Rabban Gamaliel II lived in a time when the custom was to make funerals very ostentatious, and the costs of burial grew so great that some people who could not afford to keep up would simply abandon the bodies of their dead. Gamaliel II, who was the leader of his community, prescribed a simple style of burial for himself – he was carried out in inexpensive linen shrouds. Therefore, all the people followed his example.

The Funeral

It is a mitzvah to keep the cost of funeral and burial low so that all may be buried in an equally respectable manner.

It is a mitzvah to bury the dead quickly. This is derived from the Torah: "His body shall not remain overnight... You shall surely bury him the same day." (Deut. 21.23). In the Talmud the concept is developed:

If the relative keeps the body overnight to honor the deceased – to have his death made known in nearby towns, to bring professional women mourners for him, or to procure for him a coffin and shrouds – he violates no precept, for all he does is done for the honor of the deceased. (BT Sanhedrin 46b-47a)

It is a mitzvah to delay burial so as to allow for the donation of organs which may help to save another's life or improve the quality of that life. In some cases it may also be a mitzvah to donate one's body for scientific research, but the emotional costs to the mourners who must delay the closure of the burial for a year or more should be taken into consideration.

Embalming the dead is usually not necessary unless burial must be delayed. Requirements of *kvod hameyt* prescribe only those embalming techniques which leave the body intact.

It is a mitzvah to be sensitive to the needs of the mourners, and to support them in their grief.

