

A General Introduction:

The laws and customs pertaining to the care and disposition of human remains upon death derive from a direct reflection of the most fundamental principles of the Jewish Faith. These include the absolute belief in the creation of man, by G-d, in His image; the belief in the eternity of the soul (Neshama) that is the Divine source of all life. When the soul leaves its temporary (earthly) habitat, the body, it goes on to the eternal World of Ultimate Truth (Olam Ha-Emet). Another basic belief is in a Day of Final Judgement (Yom Hadin), before G-d, and the subsequent acceptance of reward and punishment (S'char V'onesh) with its pursuant need for atonement (Kapparah) for any transgressions committed in life. Finally is the belief in the Resurrection of the Dead (T'chiyat Hametim), which we affirm in the silent prayer (Shmoneh Esrei) recited three times a day. These concepts are expressed by Maimonides in his Thirteen Principles of Faith.

What is Shmira?

It is attending to and guarding of the remains from the moment of death until the burial. In the absence of a family member or friend familiar with the prevailing customs, a shomer (guard or watcher) can be arranged for by the funeral director. Traditionally, Psalms (T'hillim) are recited at this time.

Why Shmira?

Because the human body is the container of the G-d given soul (Neshama) it is deserving of the utmost respect. There are two primary reasons for Shmira: 1. To guard the human remains from becoming prey to rodents or insects. 2. In the belief that the soul remains with the body until after burial fully aware of its condition and surroundings, Shmira is therefore a mark of respect expressed by never leaving the body alone, discarded like a vessel that is no longer of use. While the first reason may not apply in all situations such as where refrigeration and modern sanitary conditions exist, the second reason applies under all circumstances. The presence of a pious Jew reciting Psalms (T'hillim) specifically for the purpose of showing respect for the deceased person is a source of great comfort to the soul.

K'vura B'karka: In - Ground Burial

The obligation to bury the human remains as immediately as possible is a Biblical one, and is one of the 613 (Taryag) Mitzvot: "For thou shalt surely bury him on that day." (Deut. 21:23) The Torah defines the burial "For dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return." (Genesis 3:19) Burial is the most basic right of every human being. Responsibility for burial generally falls upon the closest family members, however, in the absence of family the entire community or the individual aware of the need must assume the obligation. The Torah considers this right so sacred that it requires the High Priest (Kohain Gadol) to become defiled (and unable to fulfill his priestly duty) in order to bury a total stranger (met mitzvah) whom he finds unattended in a desolate



WHAT IS A JEWISH FUNERAL?

*Kovod Hames
Respect For The Dead*

**A Focus On Shmira (Watching)
and K'vura B'karka
(In-Ground Burial)**

place. This takes on added significance when we realize that the High Priest is forbidden to participate even in the burial of his own family.

The Aron: The Burial Casket

The return of the human remains to dust should be as swift as possible in the belief that ultimately it helps to atone for our earthly transgressions permitting our eternal peaceful rest. The casket must be made completely of wood, with holes at the bottom. Metal caskets and burial vaults are not permitted by Jewish law. Where a concrete liner is required by the cemetery due to conditions such as water seepage and shifting earth it should be open at the bottom and filled with earth before covering.

Why Not Mausoleums?

Some may equate mausoleums with the burials of the Biblical era. In fact, modern-day, above-ground mausoleums are not Halachically comparable to the burials in underground caves and crypts of the Biblical and Talmudic periods. While burial in mausoleums allows for the decomposition of the body, it significantly retards and prolongs the process and the body never returns to the earth. This is a direct contradiction to the Biblical obligation of burial (K'vura).

Why Not Cremation?

Cremation is seen as one of the most abhorrent transgressions of Jewish tradition and law. Not only does it violate the Biblical mandate for burial, it is seen as the ultimate denial of G-d's existence. If G-d in fact created man, He certainly retained the right to legislate the disposition of His creation. Cremation has historically been linked to pagan ritual. It also denies the principle of the ultimate Resurrection of the Dead (T'chiyat Hametim). To reduce the human body to ashes is the harshest form of desecration and indignity conferred upon that which was created in the image of G-d. The Halacha is also clear: Even where the will of the deceased is to be cremated, the will of G-d takes precedence.

Who Performs the Burial?

Those attending the service should fill the grave until a mound is formed. Although an emotionally difficult time for the bereaved, the burial is a beautiful expression of respect, performing the last act of kindness for a loved one. Participation in the interment is a great Mitzvah. Witnessing the interment assists us in accepting the reality of the death. A prayer accepting G-d's judgement (Tzidduk Hadin) is traditionally recited at this painful moment of sorrow and grief helping us to affirm our faith in G-d and the justice of His Divine Will.