

**Dignity for the body
Peace for the soul**

**An introduction to
Jewish Burial Customs**

**What happens to
the Soul after death
should make all the difference
in your burial decisions**

When a person dies, the soul or *neshama* hovers around the body. This *nehama* is the essence of the person, the consciousness and totality. The thoughts, deeds, experiences and relationships. The body was its container, while it lasted, and the *neshama*, now on the way to the Eternal World, refuses to leave until the body is buried. In effect, the totality of the person who died continues to exist for a while in the vicinity of the body. A Jewish funeral is therefore most concerned with the feelings of the deceased, not only the feelings of the mourners. How we treat the body and how we behave around the body must reflect how we would act around the very person himself at this crucial moment.

Shmira / The Vigil

**From the moment of death
to the moment of burial the
body is never left alone**

Now more than ever, the body deserves respect. After all, there is a real awareness around the body that knows exactly what is going on. It would be insensitive to leave the body alone, without any attention, as if it were being discarded because it was no longer useful. Arrangements for a *shomer* or guard should therefore be made. These watchmen stay with the body day and night, reciting passages from the Book of Psalms. This lends great comfort to the *neshama* while it waits for the body's burial and its ascent to the Eternal World.

Tahara / The Preparation

**The body leaves the world
the way it entered**

A newborn is immediately cleaned and washed when it enters the world. And so it is when a person leaves the world. After all, the soul is about to be reborn in a new spiritual world. We also believe that eventually the body will be resurrected in this world. A *Tahara* is performed by members of the *Chevra Kadisha* (Burial Society). This is a complete cleansing and dressing of the body, performed according to Jewish Law and Custom. Prayers asking for the forgiveness of the deceased and the soul's eternal peace are offered. While *Tahara* requires that the body be made as presentable as possible, embalming, cosmetizing or any other attempts to create a life-like appearance through artificial means are contrary to Jewish Law.

Tachrichim / The Shroud

Dressing for the final Yom Kippur

The *neshama* is about to face its final Judgment Day and clothes don't matter – good deeds do. That's why every Jew is buried exactly alike. In a handmade, simple, perfectly clean, white linen shroud which includes a white linen hat, shirt, pants, shoes, coat and belt. Men are dressed in a *tallis* (payer shawl). The shrouds have no pockets to accentuate the fact that no worldly belongings accompany him. The shrouds are modeled after the white uniform worn by the High Priest in the Holy Temple on Yom Kippur when he stood before G-d asking for the needs of his family and the entire Jewish People. These shrouds are therefore especially appropriate because each and every *neshama* asks for the needs of his or her family on the final Judgment Day.

Aron / The Casket

**Allowing the body's
natural return to dust
to be as swift as
possible**

“For dust you are and to dust you shall return.” This biblical teaching is what guides us in selecting a casket. The casket must not be made of material that slows down the body's natural return to the elements. Metal caskets are therefore not permitted. Wood is the only material allowed and several holes are opened at the bottom to hasten the body's return to the earth. When vaults are required, they too should be open at the bottom. Caskets remain closed because viewing the body is seen as disrespectful and undignified and is therefore forbidden according to Jewish Law.

Kvura BiKarka / In-Ground Burial

**The natural decomposition
of the body is of
utmost importance in
Jewish Law**

The *neshama's* return to heaven is dependent upon the body's return to the ground. That's what the Prophet means when he says, "The dust returns to the earth . . . and the spirit returns to G-d who gave it." Jewish Law is therefore concerned with the immediacy of burial and the natural decomposition of the body. Mausoleums are forbidden since they retard the process of return to the earth. Cremation is certainly forbidden. It is the harshest for the indignity to the body and a pagan ritual that denies the existence of G-d. The only acceptable burial is directly in the ground, with family members and friends helping to fill the grave completely until a mound is formed. No attempt to retard the body's decomposition is permitted.

The Role of the Chevra Kadisha / Burial Society

**Preparing a fellow Jew
for burial is an especially
great mitzvah**

Throughout Jewish History being a member of the *Chevra Kadisha* has been a great honor. Members of the Burial Society are selected for their character, integrity and personal devotion to Jewish Tradition. These men and women are on call 24 hours a day to perform a *Tahara* and to ensure that the laws and traditions of Jewish burial are executed properly. Their greatest concern is the sensitive care, modesty and dignity of the deceased. Men care for men, women care for women, Jew cares for fellow Jew. There is no better way to ensure the dignity of the body than to entrust its preparation to the *Chevra Kadisha*.