A time to mourn

Reflections on Jewish bereavement practices

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Abstract: Jewish people in many western countries are often well integrated into their host societies. There is, therefore, considerable variation in the observance of Jewish rituals and experiences of grief and mourning within Jewish communities. This article explains some aspects of traditional ritual and practice in relation to mourning among Jewish people living in the UK. However, care should be taken not to make assumptions about the customs and practices of people from particular faith communities. Bereavement supporters should offer clients opportunity and encouragement to explain the meanings they attribute to their loss in the context of their particular needs and circumstances.

Keywords: Jewish, death, bereavement, ritual, mourning

My mother, who was 90 and unwell, lived in a Jewish care home in London. One morning she had a severe stroke at 8.00 am. I, being the nearest of her three children, was called and contacted my siblings. We gathered at her bedside. This, for us, was natural: visiting the sick and accompanying the dying is a Jewish commandment.

From the time of her stroke, her dying trajectory took three days and we ensured that one of us was always there, even throughout the night. The care staff were supportive of our presence, respectful of our customs, and cared for us as well as her.

Our family is not atypical of an English Jewish family in that we span the spectrum of religious practice. My brother is no longer affiliated to the Jewish community, but my own family and that of my sister remain observant to Jewish orthodox practices.

Our mother's health was clearly deteriorating during the Sabbath and, because of the Sabbath's restrictions on travel and communication, we ensured that one of her three children or grandchildren was with her throughout that night and day. At the end of the Sabbath my husband sang the traditional melodies, which included some of our mother's favourite psalms such as psalm 23. This recitation is both pertinent to the Sabbath as well as deemed comforting to the dying person. As her death appeared to be imminent, our spouses and her grandchildren joined us to recite the prescribed Jewish prayers and readings and be with her at the time of her death. She died at 10.00 pm, by which time the Sabbath had ended.

Jewish law dictates that the body should be removed for burial as soon as possible, but the Sabbath delays such arrangements. As we are active members of a community, we knew the procedures, so left a message for the Chevrah Kadisha (Jewish Burial Society) to start the process. In the meantime, our mother's body remained in her room and the care home staff, who were not Jewish, helped the female family members lift her body onto the floor. Family and friends and fellow congregants organised a rota to watch over her throughout the night.

The following morning the care home staff who were arriving for the morning shift came to see her and say their goodbyes. Shortly thereafter, the Chevra Kadisha came to collect her and take her to the cemetery for ritual washing of her body. Jewish law states that the body should be cleansed by someone of the same sex from the Jewish community, and dressed in a shroud before being placed in a plain coffin.

Prior to the funeral we three children told stories about our mother to the Rabbi so that he could incorporate them into the funeral address. On our arrival at the cemetery, but prior to the funeral, we designated mourners tore a piece of an outer garment, to signify loss. We were now relieved of further decision-making. At her graveside there was a communal burying of the dead; we all shovelled soil to cover her coffin. In

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Jewish law, coffins and funerals are standardised – simple, with no flowers.

After the funeral, as designated mourners, we were driven to my home, where we commenced our shiva (meaning seven) week, with our mourners' meal prepared by neighbours and other family members. We conducted communal prayers morning, afternoon and evening. Mourners do not wear leather shoes; they sit on low chairs and receive visitors throughout the day and evening.

We did not work or do usual everyday tasks – these were done for us. Family, community members and friends prepared all our meals. This gave the three of us, and our families, plenty of time to reminisce. This was a time to talk about our mother with the many people who knew her over her long life. It was a time too to retrace memories of our father, who died many years before. As my sister said: 'It was like her life being played out before her' – a special space to collect and connect with many memories; a time to feel sad, and to smile.

After the shiva we resumed many of our daily activities but, as children mourning a parent, my sister and I did not attend any public entertainment for the duration of avelut, the 12-month period following the death. We also observed other restrictions, which differ for the mourners depending on whether they are parent, spouse, sibling or child of the deceased, throughout the shloshim (the first 30 days following the death). The shloshim (meaning 30) is kept by all categories of mourners and bridges the shiva and the remainder of the avelut, with restrictions reducing with each milestone.

In Israel it is the custom to set the gravestone after 30 days, the end of the shloshim, but in the UK it is usually done towards the end of the avelut year of mourning following the death. My sister, brother and I selected the stone and the grandchildren contributed ideas for the wording in preparation for the stone-setting at the end of the year of mourning, which is sometimes called an unveiling or consecration. The timing felt right, it fitted; we had lived a year without her, through all its significant times, anniversaries of special dates and the cycle of Jewish festivals. Family and friends gathered again at her graveside in a lighter mood than the previous year and we all had a sense of being able to move on.

Every year since, on the anniversary of her death in the Jewish calendar, we light a yahrtzeit (time of year) candle, which burns for a day, and recite the Kaddish (mourner's prayer) during that day's synagogue prayer services. Additionally, there are other holy days on which deceased relatives are remembered in prayers in the synagogue: on the festivals of Passover, Feast of Weeks (or Shavuot), and Tabernacles, and on the Day of Atonement, we join in the Yiskor Memorial prayer with all the other congregants remembering relatives who have died.

Jewish mourning practices

Bereavement practices vary among and between Jewish people, depending on their family origins, location, degree of affiliation to an organised community, personal beliefs and practices and many other factors. This article began with an account by one of the authors of the dying and death of her mother. We included this as a way to introduce Jewish mourning practices to readers from other faiths and of no faith who may find themselves supporting a bereaved Jewish person. This author is an observant Jewish woman who lives in the UK and has worked professionally with dying and bereaved people of many faiths for over 20 years.

Most Jewish communities outside Israel have local structures that provide a support network for Jews from cradle to grave. Jews are usually members of a synagogue, which is normally affiliated to a central religious organisation. In some countries, synagogue membership includes all funeral costs. When notified of a death, the relevant Jewish Burial Society (Chevra Kadisha) collects the body, takes it to its own premises, where it keeps it cool, organises the ritual cleansing by same-sex Jews, and arranges the funeral.

Caring for the body is a religious obligation in Jewish law. Bodies should be interfered with as little as possible. This includes autopsies, which are discouraged unless the result might save a living person. Jewish law states that bodies should be buried as quickly as possible following death. Burial, which usually takes place in specially consecrated cemeteries, is a central tenet of Judaism and applies to all Jews, regardless of whether they originate from Europe (Ashkenazim) or the Middle East (Sephardim).

Cremation is forbidden by Jewish law, but is practised by some Jews affiliated to non-traditional movements, as well as by unaffiliated Jews. However, even those who practise cremation may choose to observe some Jewish mourning customs.

Everyone, regardless of religious affiliation, is welcome both at Jewish funerals and the house of mourning. Modest dress is appreciated and men are required to cover their heads with hats, caps or skullcaps (usually provided on site). Orthodox married women also wear head covering. Prayers are said in a combination of Hebrew and English at the cemetery hall and graveside, and in the morning, afternoon and evening in the shiva house. Men and women usually stand separately during formal prayers and, depending on space, may be in different rooms in the home. Shiva may take place in either the deceased's home or that of one of the principal mourners. Those wishing to express condolences are encouraged to visit through the day and evenings of the shiva.

Jewish mourning customs

Many aspects of Jewish religious practice focus on the seasons. Death itself is seen as the natural and expected end of the life course. 'To everything there is a season: a time to be born, and a time to die' (Ecclesiastes 3.2, King James Bible). Fredda Herz Brown (1989) encapsulates some of the essence of Jewish practice. She observes that Jews:

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'… have a strong concern with the ebb and flow of life, as demonstrated by their focus on life cycle ritual. They are also a very expressive ethnic group with a tradition of shared suffering … These values and characteristics assist the Jews in dealing with death openly and directly. If they need assistance in this regard, it is to get in touch with the personal aspects of the death ritual and to make it as meaningful as possible for all involved.' (pp460–461)

Specific practices in relation to life and death are prescribed in the Pentateuch and other Jewish rituals have evolved over the millennia. However, knowledge about Jewish law, particularly in relation to mourning, is not uniform in the Jewish community. Observant Jews consult the Talmud and other written sources to ensure that they are conducting themselves in an appropriate manner.

Jews are scattered around the world. Consequently texts have been translated from the original Hebrew into different languages explaining the principles and practices of Jewish funerals and mourning. English language books (for example, Lamm, 1969; Goldberg, 1991; Riemer, 1995; Heilman, 2001) are widely available. Some of these provide modern interpretations of Old Testament texts, rabbinic literature, and the precedents upon which Jewish law is based, and others contextualise the practices within contemporary academic and practitioner literature. They cover the period from when a Jew is perceived to be close to death (goses), caring for the body, and the prescribed behaviour of relatives before and during the funeral, the week of mourning (shiva), the first month (shloshim), the remainder of the first year (avelut) and then the annual remembrance. Jewish law also requires the community to support mourners.

The narrative at the beginning of this article illustrates some of the practices carried out by observant Jews. It rehearses some of the obligations of the next-of-kin to the dying and dead person. The children (boys over the age of 13, girls over the age of 12) are the primary mourners of a dying person, and their duties continue for 12 Jewish calendar months following the death of a parent. Secondary mourners – parents, spouses and siblings – observe mourning practices for one month. All categories of mourners observe the shiva. There is no shiva for someone who has no close relatives.

Until the funeral, all designated mourners are permitted to carry out most activities, enabling them to make the necessary arrangements. Following the funeral, the principal male mourners (those who adhere to Jewish law) join in communal prayers, reciting the mourner's kaddish prayer three times a day for their mourning period. The shiva period provides a formula for the saying of prayers and provision of meals and for greeting and receiving visitors. This may lessen some of the difficulties reported by bereaved people when they have to face friends and colleagues for the first time following the death. The restrictions imposed on normal activities for designated mourners for the three periods of shiva, shloshim and avelut are intended to release mourners from the burden of day-to-day tasks and give them an opportunity to absorb their loss. Attending public entertainment and refraining from buying new clothes are two of these restrictions.

The gradual return to normal life of the principal mourners (the gradual take-up of domestic and other tasks and reduction in restrictions) from the shiva, through shloshim to the end of avelut reflects contemporary grief theories (for example, Worden, 1991; Stroebe & Schut, 1999), in that it facilitates gradual reintegration into society while adjusting to the loss of the dead person. The supportive role expected of the community recognises that a bereaved person is vulnerable and needs support.

Imber-Black (1989) notes the potency of rituals:

'Relying on symbols, metaphors, and actions, which are capable of multiple meanings, life cycle rituals function to reduce anxiety about change … Since the ritual event is time and space bounded, a safe and manageable context for the expression of strong emotions is created.' (p149)

Customs, beliefs and contexts

Some theorists note the impact of religious beliefs and cultural practices on the grief process. McGoldrick (1989) suggests that counsellors need basic information about practices, customs and beliefs in order to be able to respond to clients who follow religions with specific understandings of and/or particular cultural responses to death. She also proposes that the therapist can act as 'cultural broker' to the bereaved person, and help the client 'to recognize their own ethnic values' (p86) so they can move through the mourning process. She writes:

'It is important to appreciate that cultural groups have specific beliefs about forms of mourning and the clinician must find out from a family what its members believe about death, the rituals that surround it, and the afterlife. Often a failure to carry out such death rituals, for whatever reason, is an important component of the family's becoming embedded in the mourning process. In fact, because of the dominance of hospital personnel and funeral directors in the death process, family members may have lost control of their traditions, and thus may come to view participation in ritual as a sign of weakness or of being "unsophisticated" or superstitious. It can be extremely helpful to encourage family members to respect the traditions of their heritage and to be active in determining what cultural forms they will use to deal with their losses.' (pp81–82)

Even someone from that community may not know where and how a particular client situates themselves in their cultural, religious world. Anderson and Goolishian (1992) recommend taking a 'not-knowing position' in relation to clients, and this can be used in combination with the advice of Cecchin (1987) that the counsellor should acknowledge their own prejudices,

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be open-minded and show 'curiosity', to enable the client to describe their own experience of bereavement. These strategies are recommended in the context of therapy, but can be useful to anyone involved with a bereaved person.

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It is important also to recognise the context of the secular society in which most Jewish people live. The Jewish diaspora and the consequences of the Holocaust mean that many Jews may not have close relatives nearby, if at all. Nevertheless, Jewish religious practice remains family and community oriented. Those with strong family and community networks will receive support during the shiva and thereafter. But those who do not live in conventional families, or who are separated from a Jewish community, may not. Moreover, some Jewish people live alone, or no longer observe the Jewish faith, or may elect not to participate in Jewish communal activities. Some may find oppressive, alienating or even distressing the prescribed rituals and emphasis on family and community sharing of grief. It is important not to make assumptions before hearing the story of the person seeking support.

In keeping with Jewish values, there are many Jewish-run organisations providing support for Jewish people with physical, social, emotional, practical and other needs. However, these organisations are not universally available; nor do they serve the whole Jewish population. Some Jewish people do not seek support from their own community, for reasons that may include alienation, lifestyle, or their desire to retain anonymity. For this reason, Jewish bereaved people may be referred to local and national support organisations who are unfamiliar with the range of Jewish customs and cultures, and may seek guidance from Jewish organisations.

Conclusion

The personal account that opened this article illustrates orthodox Jewish mourning practices from the deathbed through the year of mourning to the annual remembrance service. For those who adhere to Jewish law, the death practices and mourning customs may provide both a private and a communal way of managing bereavement. Yet, although Jewish laws in relation to death, burial and mourning are explicit, practice varies quite widely, except among the ultra-orthodox, where it is much more homogeneous.

It is unwise to make assumptions on the basis of external attributes about how different people will observe and respond to death and bereavement. Individuals will respond in their own ways, which may not follow orthodox or even previous personal practice.

Many modern Jews observe some religious rites and not others. For example, in Israel even non-religious Jews observe the shiva as a social event. Additionally, as in other ethnic groups, there are some Jews for whom religious practice has no collective memory or meaning or has negative connotations, and who consequently do not participate in private or communal mourning rituals.

The basic information about traditional rituals included in this article is intended only to contextualise the bereavement experience of Jewish clients. It is important to emphasise the dangers of imposing a framework on bereaved people (Gunuratnam, 1997). Bereaved Jewish people should be encouraged and given opportunity to explain the meanings they attribute to their loss in the context of their understandings and experiences of Jewish mourning practices. ■

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