

Lesson

2

TAKING LEAVE

OUR EVOLVING RELATIONSHIP WITH THE DEPARTED

Is death painful for souls? Is my presence felt when I visit a grave? Judaism's pre-burial and burial rituals accompany the soul's gradual transition from a limiting physical life to a completely spiritual one. We discuss those rituals and how, once freed, the soul's connection to the living continues in new and powerful ways.



▲ TWO HEART

Edvard Munch, colored woodcut, Berlin, 1899. (Tel Aviv Museum)

I. UNTETHERED

This chapter will explore what happens during the interval between the moment a person passes away and interment. While exploring the topic of interment, we will also examine the subject of grave visitation.

A soul's departure from its body signals the onset of a new phase in its journey. It is no longer attached and tethered to the foreign world of materiality; the soul is now free to soar in its native habitat—the spiritual, heavenly realms.

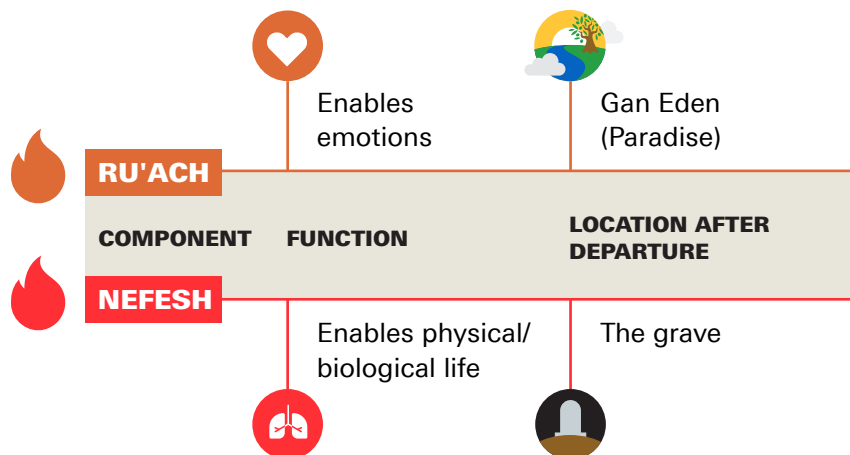
What significance does Judaism give to that fateful moment of transition?

Two letters that were penned by two Chasidic masters—along with an exploration of two of the soul's five components—will allow us to discover the ramifications that the moment of passing carries for the soul itself, as well as for those it leaves behind.



FIGURE 2.1

SOUL COMPONENTS





TEXT 1A

ESSENTIAL CONNECTION

RABBI SHNE'UR ZALMAN OF LIADI, *TANYA*, *IGERET HAKODESH*, CHAPTER 27

RABBI SHNE'UR ZALMAN OF LIADI (ALTER REBBE) 1745–1812

Chasidic rebbe, halachic authority, and founder of the Chabad movement. The Alter Rebbe was born in Liozna, Belarus, and was among the principal students of the Magid of Mezeritch. His numerous works include the *Tanya*, an early classic containing the fundamentals of Chabad Chasidism; and *Shulchan Aruch HaRav*, an expanded and reworked code of Jewish law.



Rabbi Yitzchak Schochet, in “Soul Connection,” expounds upon the deceased’s continuing relationship with his or her loved ones: myJLI.com/soul

כְּנֹדַע שְׁחַיֵי הַצַּדִּיק אֵינָם חַיִּים בְּשָׂרִים כִּי אִם חַיִּים רִוּחַנִיִּים, שֶׁהֵם אֲמוּנָה וְיִרְאָה וְאַהֲבָה . . .
וְהִנֵּה, בְּהֵיאוֹת הַצַּדִּיק חַי עַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה, הָיָה שְׁלֵשָׁה מִדּוֹת אֱלֹהֵי בְּתוּךְ כָּלִי וּלְבוּשׁ שְׁלֵהֶם, בְּבַחֲיַנֵּת מְקוֹם גְּשָׁמִי, שֶׁהִיא בְּחִינַת נֶפֶשׁ הַקְּשׁוּרָה בְּגוּפּוֹ.
וְכָל תַּלְמִידָיו אֵינָם מְקַבְּלִים רַק הָאֲרֶת מִדּוֹת אֱלֹהֵי וְזִיוֹן הַמַּאֲוִיר חוּץ לְכָלִי זֶה עַל יְדֵי דְבוּרָיו וּמַחְשָׁבוֹתָיו הַקְּדוּשִׁים. וְלָכֵן אָמְרוּ רַז"ל, שֶׁאֵין אָדָם עוֹמֵד עַל דַּעַת רַבּוֹ, וְכוּ'.
אֲבָל לְאַחַר פְּטִירָתוֹ, לְפִי שְׁמֵת־פְּרָדִים בְּחִינַת הַנֶּפֶשׁ שֶׁנִּשְׁאַרָה בְּקֶבֶר מִבְּחִינַת הַרוּחַ שֶׁבִּגְן עֵדֶן שֶׁהוּא שְׁלֵשׁ מִדּוֹת הַלְלוּ, לְפִיכָּהּ יְכוּל כָּל הַקְּרוֹב אֵלָיו לְקַבֵּל חֶלֶק מִבְּחִינַת רוּחוֹ שֶׁבִּגְן עֵדֶן, הוּאִיל וְאֵינָהּ בְּתוּךְ כָּלִי וְלֹא בְּבַחֲיַנֵּת מְקוֹם גְּשָׁמִי . . .
הַלְפָּה, נִקְל מְאֹד לְתַלְמִידָיו לְקַבֵּל חֶלֶק מִבְּחִינַת רוּחַ רַבִּם הַעֲצָמִיית, שֶׁהֵם אֲמוּנָתוֹ וְיִרְאָתוֹ וְאַהֲבָתוֹ אֲשֶׁר עֲבַד בָּהֶם אֶת ה', וְלֹא זִיוּם בְּלִבָּד הַמַּאֲוִיר חוּץ לְכָלִי . . . כָּל אֶחָד כְּפִי בְּחִינַת הַתְּקַשְׁרוּתוֹ וְקִרְבָּתוֹ אֵלָיו בְּחַיָּו וּבְמוֹתוֹ בְּאַהֲבָה רַבָּה, כִּי הַמְּשַׁכֵּת כָּל רוּחַנִיּוֹת אֵינָהּ אֶלָּא עַל יְדֵי אַהֲבָה רַבָּה.

As is known, the life of the *tsadik* [righteous person] is not physical but spiritual; it consists of faith, reverence, and love [for G-d]. . . .

During the *tsadik's* lifetime on earth, these three attributes [that belong to the soul dimension of *ru'ach*] are constrained within their container and garb, namely, the *nefesh* that is bound to the corporeal body. This imposes the restraints of physical space upon these attributes.

As a result, all the *tsadik's* disciples receive but a glow of these *ru'ach* attributes, a mere ray that is emitted beyond the container by means of the

TEXT 1A CONTINUED

tsadik's holy words and thoughts. [The inability to receive directly from *ru'ach* is a revelatory handicap] and therefore, our sages stated that it takes forty years for students to fully plumb the depths of their master's teachings (TALMUD, AVODAH ZARAH 5B).

By contrast, after the *tsadik's* passing, the *nefesh* separates from the *ru'ach* and remains in the grave, while the *ru'ach* and its three attributes rise to Gan Eden. Consequently, whoever is close to the *tsadik* can receive directly from his *ru'ach* in Gan Eden because the *ru'ach* is no longer restrained in a container or confined to a physical space. . . .

There is now a straightforward path for the *tsadik's* disciples to connect with the *essence* of their master's *ru'ach*—the faith, awe, and love with which the *tsadik* served G-d—and not merely these attributes' outer glow that escaped beyond their container. . . .

The disciples connect and receive commensurate to the degree of their loving connection and closeness to the *tsadik* during his lifetime and after his death. For the transmission of all things spiritual is always by means of great love.



What is the Jewish view on near-death experiences? In "Near-Death Experience," *Rabbi DovBer Pinson* offers some insights: myJLI.com/soul



TEXT 1B

A SPIRIT UNSHACKLED

THE REBBE, RABBI MENACHEM MENDEL SCHNEERSON, LETTER, 5 TAMUZ 5743 (1983)

RABBI MENACHEM MENDEL SCHNEERSON
1902–1994

The towering Jewish leader of the 20th century, known as “the Lubavitcher Rebbe,” or simply as “the Rebbe.” Born in southern Ukraine, the Rebbe escaped Nazi-occupied Europe, arriving in the U.S. in June 1941. The Rebbe inspired and guided the revival of traditional Judaism after the European devastation, impacting virtually every Jewish community the world over. The Rebbe often emphasized that the performance of just one additional good deed could usher in the era of Mashiach. The Rebbe’s scholarly talks and writings have been printed in more than 200 volumes.



. . . It is also a matter of common sense that whatever the direct cause of the separation of the soul from the body (whether a fatal accident or a fatal illness, etc.), it could affect only any of the vital organs of the *physical* body, but could in no way affect the spiritual soul.

A further point, which is also understandable, is that during the soul’s lifetime on earth in partnership with the body, the soul is necessarily “handicapped”—in certain respects—by the requirements of the body (such as eating and drinking, etc.). Even a *Tzaddik* whose entire life is consecrated to *HaShem* [G-d] cannot escape the restraints of life in a material and physical environment. Consequently, when the time comes for the soul to return “home,” it is essentially a *release* for it as it makes its ascent to a higher world, no longer restrained by a physical body and physical environment. Henceforth the soul is free to enjoy the spiritual bliss of being near to *HaShem* in the fullest measure.

II. IN TRANSIT

No one would argue that the moment of a soul's departure is not a difficult experience for the relatives. Death is always difficult, and sometimes utterly crushing, for the deceased's loved ones.

But how does the *deceased* experience it? Is it difficult for a freshly departed soul as well?

As we will see, corporeal demise is indeed hard on the soul, despite the benefits and freedoms the soul gains by its departure (as explained previously).

In fact, the degree of distress that a soul experiences upon its return to the realm of the spirit directly mirrors the scale of suffering that its loved ones left to mourn its passing experience here on this world.



TEXT 2

A DIFFICULT FAREWELL

ZOHAR 3:88A

ZOHAR

The seminal work of kabbalah, Jewish mysticism. The *Zohar* is a mystical commentary on the Torah, written in Aramaic and Hebrew. According to the Arizal, the *Zohar* contains the teachings of Rabbi Shimon bar Yocha'i, who lived in the Land of Israel during the 2nd century. The *Zohar* has become one of the indispensable texts of traditional Judaism, alongside and nearly equal in stature to the Mishnah and Talmud.



וְלִית לָהּ לְנַפְשָׁא קִשְׁיָו בְּכֻלָּא כְּפִרְיֵישׁוּ דִּילָהּ מִן גּוּפָא.

Nothing is as hard for the soul as its separation from the body.



CANDLESTICK ▶

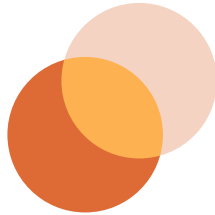
Paul Klee, oil on paper, 1937–1938.
(Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki, Japan)



FIGURE 2.2

PAINFUL SEPARATION

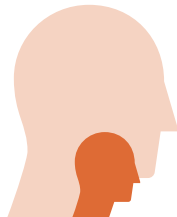
Three of the reasons why a soul experiences difficulty in parting from its body:



1. All transitions—even necessary and positive ones—are hard.
-



2. The soul can perform *mitzvot* only in this world. It mourns the loss of this opportunity.
-



3. The soul and body bond over time and develop an attachment. Breaking an attachment is traumatic.



TEXT 3

FIRST THREE DAYS

JERUSALEM TALMUD,
MO'ED KATAN 3:5

JERUSALEM TALMUD

A commentary to the Mishnah, compiled during the 4th and 5th centuries. The Jerusalem Talmud predates its Babylonian counterpart by 100 years and is written in both Hebrew and Aramaic. While the Babylonian Talmud is the most authoritative source for Jewish law, the Jerusalem Talmud remains an invaluable source for the spiritual, intellectual, ethical, historical, and legal traditions of Judaism.



כָּל תְּלַתָּא יוֹמִין נַפְשָׁא טַיִסָּא עַל גּוּפָא,
סְבִירָה דְהִיא חֲזֵרָה לְגַבִּיָּה.
כִּינּוּן דְהִיא חֲמִיָּיא דְאִישְׁתַּנִּי זִינְיָהוּן דְאַפּוּי,
הִיא שְׂבָקָא לִיהּ וְאַזְלָה לָּהּ.

For three days, the soul hovers above the body, thinking that it can return to it.

[After three days,] when it sees that the body's face has changed, it leaves the body and departs.



RIKUD HA'OR (THE DANCE OF LIGHT) ►

Baruch Nachshon, acrylic on canvas,
Chevron, 2015. (nachshonart.com)



TEXT 4A

FIRST SEVEN DAYS

ZOHAR 1:218B–219A

כָּל ז' יוֹמִין, נִשְׁמָתָא אֶזְלָא מִבֵּיתִיהּ לְקַבְרִיהּ וּמִקַּבְרִיהּ לְבֵיתִיהּ וְאִתְאַבְּלַת עַלּוּי דְּגוּפָא . . . בְּיַתְרָא ז' יוֹמִין גּוּפָא הוּי כְּמָה דְּהוּהּ, וְנִשְׁמָתִיהּ עָאֵלַת לְדוּכְתָא.

For seven days, the soul goes from the house where it lived to the grave, and from the grave back to the house, and it mourns its body. . . . After seven days, the body is subjected to its fate, and the soul ascends to its place.



TEXT 4B

FIRST THIRTY DAYS

ZOHAR 2:199B

כָּל אֵינוֹן תַּלְתֵּין יוֹמִין,
אֶתְדַנּוּ נַפְשָׁא וְגוּפָא כְּחַדָּא,
וּבְגִינֵי כְּה, אִשְׁתַּפַּח נִשְׁמָתָא לְתַתָּא בְּאַרְעָא . . .
לְבַתְרָא, נִשְׁמָתָא סְלָקָא וְגוּפָא אֶתְבְּלִי בְּאַרְעָא.

For thirty days,
the soul and the body are judged as one,
and thus the soul is located down here, on earth. . . .
After that, the soul ascends while the body
erodes in the earth.



TEXT 4C

FIRST TWELVE MONTHS

TALMUD, SHABBAT 152B–153A

BABYLONIAN TALMUD

A literary work of monumental proportions that draws upon the legal, spiritual, intellectual, ethical, and historical traditions of Judaism. The 37 tractates of the Babylonian Talmud contain the teachings of the Jewish sages from the period after the destruction of the 2nd Temple through the 5th century CE. It has served as the primary vehicle for the transmission of the Oral Law and the education of Jews over the centuries; it is the entry point for all subsequent legal, ethical, and theological Jewish scholarship.



כָּל שָׁנִים עָשָׂר חֹדֶשׁ גּוֹפּוֹ קָיִים,
וְנַשְׁמָתוֹ עוֹלָה וְיורֶדֶת.
לְאַחַר שָׁנִים עָשָׂר חֹדֶשׁ הַגּוֹף בָּטֵל,
וְנַשְׁמָתוֹ עוֹלָה, וְשׁוֹב אֵינָהּ יורֶדֶת.

For twelve months, the body still exists,
and the soul ascends and descends;
after twelve months, the body becomes null,
and the soul rises and no longer returns.



ALONE ▶

Jozef Israëls, oil on canvas, c. 1880–1881.
(The Mesdag Collection, The Hague)



TEXT 5

PHASED MOURNING

MAIMONIDES, *MISHNEH TORAH*,
LAWS OF MOURNING 13:11

RABBI MOSHE BEN MAIMON
(MAIMONIDES, RAMBAM) 1135–1204

Halachist, philosopher, author, and physician. Maimonides was born in Córdoba, Spain. After the conquest of Córdoba by the Almohads, he fled Spain and eventually settled in Cairo, Egypt. There, he became the leader of the Jewish community and served as court physician to the vizier of Egypt. He is most noted for authoring the *Mishneh Torah*, an encyclopedic arrangement of Jewish law; and for his philosophical work, *Guide for the Perplexed*. His rulings on Jewish law are integral to the formation of halachic consensus.



שְׁלֹשָׁה יָמִים לְבִכּוּי,
שִׁבְעָה יָמִים לְהַסְפִּיד,
שְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם לְתַסְפוּרַת
וְלִשְׂאֵר הַחֲמִשָּׁה דְּבָרִים.

Mourners observe three days of weeping;
seven days of eulogies;
and for thirty days, restrictions on haircuts
[and wearing freshly ironed clothing,
marrying, joining a celebration of friends,
and traveling on business].



A SON OF THE ANCIENT RACE ▶

Jozef Israëls, oil on canvas, Netherlands,
c. 1889. (The Jewish Museum, New York)



TEXT 6

EXTENDED MOURNING

RABBI YOSEF CARO, SHULCHAN ARUCH, *YOREH DE'AH* 385:2

RABBI YOSEF CARO
(MARAN, *BEIT YOSEF*) 1488–1575

Halachic authority and author. Rabbi Caro was born in Spain but was forced to flee during the Expulsion in 1492 and eventually settled in Safed, Israel. He authored many works, including the *Beit Yosef*, *Kesef Mishneh*, and a mystical work, *Magid Meisharim*. Rabbi Caro's magnum opus, the *Shulchan Aruch* (Code of Jewish Law), has been universally accepted as the basis for modern Jewish law.



המוציא את חבירו אבל בתוך ל' יום, מדבר עמו תנחומין ואינו שואל בשלומו. לאחר ל' יום, שואל בשלומו ואינו מדבר עמו תנחומים כדרכו, אלא מן הצד, שאינו מזכיר לו שם המת, אלא אומר לו: "תתנחם"...

ועל אביו ועל אמו מדבר עמו תנחומין כל י"ב חדש; לאחר י"ב חדש מדבר עמו מן הצד.

If you encounter an acquaintance within thirty days of that person having lost a next of kin, offer words of consolation and avoid the customary pleasantries. If thirty days have elapsed since the relative's passing, greet your acquaintance in the usual manner and offer indirect words of consolation: avoid mentioning the deceased by name, and extend a generic consolation, such as, "May you be comforted."

If your acquaintance is mourning the loss of a parent, you should offer direct messages of comfort for the first twelve months, and only after that scale it back to indirect consolation.



A "Letter of Condolence" penned by *the Rebbe*: myJLI.com/soul



TEXT 7

MOURNING WITH THE UNMOURNED

TALMUD, SHABBAT 152A–B

מֵת שָׂאִין לוֹ מִנְחָמִין, הוֹלְכִין עֲשָׂרָה בְּנֵי אָדָם וְיוֹשְׁבֵין בְּמִקְוָמוֹ.
הֵהוּא דְשָׁכִיב בְּשִׁבְבוּתָהּ דְרַב יְהוּדָה, לֹא הָיוּ לוֹ מִנְחָמִין. כָּל יוֹמָא, הָנָה דְבַר
רַב יְהוּדָה בֵּי עֲשָׂרָה וְיָתֵבִי בְּדוּכָתָהּ. לְאַחַר שִׁבְעָה יָמִים אֵיתְחַזִּי לֵיהּ בְּחִלְמִיהּ
דְרַב יְהוּדָה וְאָמַר לֵיהּ, "תְּנִיחַ דְעֵתָךְ שְׁהִנְחַתְּ אֶת דְעֵתִי".

If a person dies and leaves no [next of kin] to be comforted, ten people should go and sit in the deceased's home.

A man died in Rabbi Yehudah's neighborhood. As there were no [mourners] to be comforted, Rabbi Yehudah assembled ten people every day, and they sat in the deceased's home. After seven days, the dead man appeared to Rabbi Yehudah in a dream and said, "May your mind be at rest, for you have set my mind at rest."



◀ AT THE SICKBED

Artur Markowicz, pastel on cardboard, Kraków, c. 1934.

III. HANDLING THE BODY

Until now, we have discussed the importance and centrality of our immortal souls. But where do our mortal bodies fit into the picture?

Is a lifeless body worthless? Once the soul's earthly "container" has been emptied of the soul's potent divine force, does its significance expire?



TEXT 8A

A STUNNING COMPARISON

TALMUD, MO'ED KATAN 25A

הַעוֹמֵד עַל הַמֵּת בְּשַׁעַת יְצִיאַת נְשָׁמָה חַיִּיב לְקַרֹּעַ,
הֲאֵל לָמָּה זֶה דּוֹמָה? לְסִפּוּר תּוֹרָה שְׁנִשְׁרָף.

One who is present at the time of a person's passing is required to tear their clothing.* This is because [a person's passing] is likened to the burning of a Torah scroll.

* Due to pragmatic reasons, this halachah is not practiced nowadays.



TEXT 8B

THE HUMAN TORAH

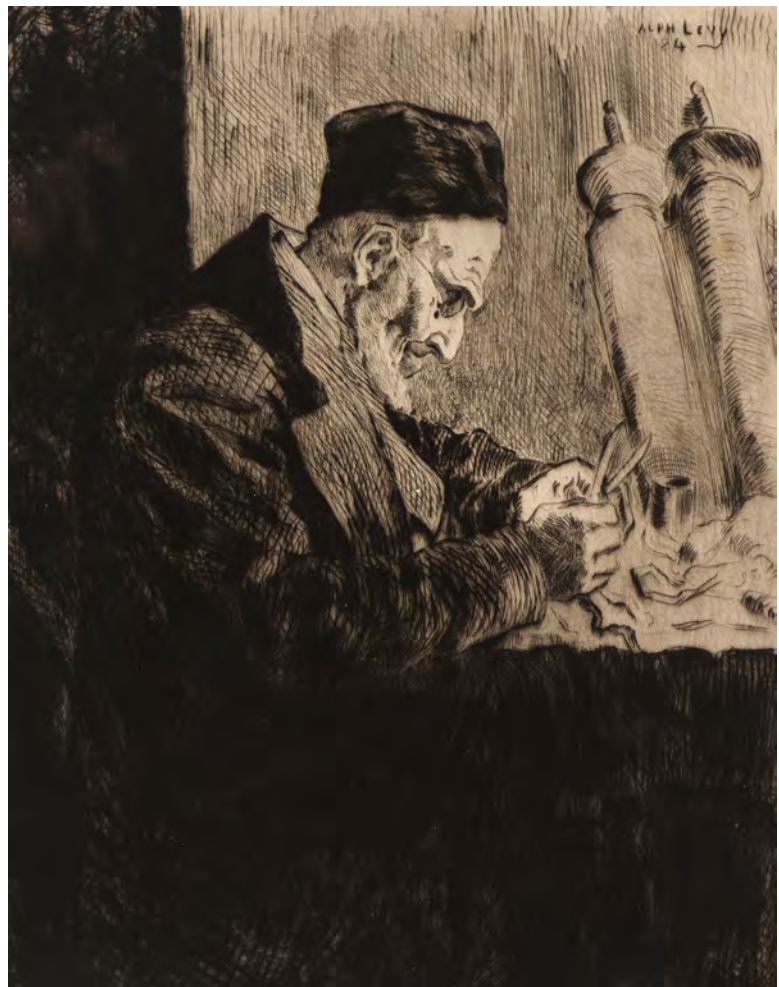
RABBI YOMTOV BEN AVRAHAM ASEVILLI, *CHIDUSHEI HARITVA*, AD LOC.

RABBI YOMTOV ASEVILLI (RITVA) C. 1250–1330

Spanish rabbi and Talmudist. Ritva was born in Seville. He is mostly known for his Talmudic commentary, which is extremely clear and, to this day, remains most frequently quoted and used.

וְהַרְמַבְ"ן ז"ל פִּירַשׁ, שֶׁהַנֶּפֶשׁ בְּגוּף כְּאַזְכָּרוֹת בְּגוּיְלִין.

Nachmanides points to the sacred names of G-d that are inked onto a Torah scroll's parchment as an analogy for the sacred soul that is installed within the corporeal body.



THE SCRIBE ►

Alphonse Lévy, drypoint etching and mezzotint on paper, 1884. (Ben Uri Gallery, London)



TEXT 9

INDEPENDENTLY HOLY

RABBI YECHIEL MICHEL
TUCAZINSKY, *GESHER*
HACHAYIM 5:1

RABBI YECHIEL MICHEL TUCAZINSKY
1874–1955

Halachist. Rabbi Tucazinsky was born in Lithuania. In 1882, his family settled in Israel. He studied in the Ets Chaim Yeshiva, where he eventually became the dean. He published many books and articles on halachic issues, including *Hayomom Bikadur Haarets*, an effort to locate the halachic dateline. His most famous work is *Gesher Hachayim*, a classic treatise on the laws of burial and mourning that examines life as a bridge between past and future.



כָּל מִתְעַסֵּק בְּמֵית צָרִיף לְדַעַת
שְׂיִישׁ לוֹ יַעֲסֵק עִם דְּבַר קְדוּשָׁה:
גּוּפוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם הוּא לֹא רַק נְרִיטִיק
שֶׁל קְדוּשָׁה שֶׁשֶׁמֶשׁ לְנִשְׁמָה הָעֵילֵאִית,
אֶלָּא שֶׁהוּא עֲצָמוֹ נִתְקַדֵּשׁ
גַּם בְּקְדוּשָׁה עֲצָמִית, בְּדוּמָה לְסֵפֶר תּוֹרָה.

All who tend to a corpse must be aware
that they are handling a holy entity.
The human body is more than simply a sheath
to a sacred entity, a tool that serves a supernal soul.
Rather, it has itself become sanctified
with an independent holiness, similar to a Torah scroll.



TEXT 10

SOLEMN HONOR GUARD

RABBI YECHIEL MICHEL
TUCAZINSKY, IBID., 5:4

הַמֵּת צָרִיךְ שְׂמִירָה - אֲפִילוּ בַיּוֹם, אֲף בְּמָקוֹם שֶׁאֵין כָּל חֵשֶׁשׁ לְהַפְסֵד גּוּפוֹ.
וְהַשׁוֹמְרוֹ עוֹשֶׂה מִצְוָה וּפְטוּר הַשׁוֹמֵר מִשְׁאָר מִצְוֹת . . . וּמִטַּעַם עוֹסֵק בְּמִצְוָה
פְּטוּר מִן הַמִּצְוָה. וּפְטוּרוֹהוּ גַם מִקְרִיאַת שְׁמַע וּתְפִלָּה . . .
שְׂמִירַת הַמֵּת הִיא . . . מִשׁוּם כְּבוֹדוֹ. שְׂאֵם יִנְיחוּהוּ לְבַדּוֹ הֵרִי זֶה כְּאִלוֹ עֲזָבוּהוּ
כְּכֵלִי אֵין חֶפֶץ עוֹד בּוֹ.

We are required to maintain constant watch over a corpse, even during the daytime, and even if there is no cause to suspect that something can happen to the body. Those who maintain watch are actively performing a mitzvah, to the extent that they are meanwhile absolved from [many] other *mitzvot*, such as reading the Shema and reciting the prayers [at the appropriate times].

We maintain a watch over the dead . . . out of respect. For if we were to leave the body alone, it would appear as if we have abandoned it like a utensil that we no longer require.



What is the Jewish way to treat a body, and why? *Dr. Lisa Aiken* briefly explains, in "Respecting the Body": myJLI.com/soul



FIGURE 2.3

PRE-BURIAL RITES AND RULES



The body is handled with extreme respect and dignity.



The deceased is covered at all times.



The body is gently cleansed and dressed in shrouds.



The body is never placed face down.



Lighthearted conversation is avoided in the presence of the deceased.



A guard remains in proximity at all times, out of respect for the deceased.



“Praying with Gittel Rivka” is a heartwarming, firsthand account of a *taharah* (ritual preparation of a body for burial) by *Miriam Karp*: myJLI.com/soul



TEXT 11

THE SUM OF ITS PARTS

RABBI MOSHE SOFER,
RESPONSA CHATAM SOFER,
YOREH DE'AH 353

RABBI MOSHE SOFER
(CHATAM SOFER) 1762–1839

A leading rabbinical authority of the 19th century. Born in Frankfurt am Main, *Chatam Sofer* ultimately accepted the rabbinate of Pressburg (now Bratislava), Slovakia. Serving as rabbi and head of the yeshiva that he established, Rabbi Sofer maintained a strong traditionalist perspective, opposing deviation from Jewish tradition. *Chatam Sofer* is the title of his collection of halachic responsa and his commentary to the Talmud.



אין חילוק בין ספר תורה שלם לאות אחת ממנו,
והוא הדין נמי עצם מעצמות הקדושים
שנבראו בצלם אלקים, אסור לנהוג בהם מנהג בזיון.

There is no differentiation [in reverential treatment] between a complete Torah scroll and a single letter [that has become detached] from a Torah scroll. Similarly, it is forbidden to handle with disrespect even a single bone [that has become detached] from a sacred body that was created in G-d's image.



PRAYING WITH TORAH ►
Alex Levin, oil on canvas, Israel.

IV. BURIAL

When G-d recalls a soul to its celestial source in the heavens, it is our sacred duty to speedily return the body—intact—to the soil, which is the source from which G-d originally fashioned the human body.

From the dawn of our nation’s history, and throughout its dissimilar stages over the course of four millennia, providing a Jewish body with a traditional Jewish burial, known as *kever Yisrael*, has remained a consistent feature and a highest priority. Stories both sad and inspiring woven throughout the annals of our history attest to the reality that Jews have consistently suffered supreme sacrifices to ensure a Jewish burial.



TEXT 12

SWIFT BURIAL

DEUTERONOMY 21:23

כִּי קִבּוֹר תִּקְבְּרֶנּוּ בַיּוֹם הַהוּא.

You shall surely bury him
on the same day [as his death].



TEXT 13

EACH TO THEIR NATIVE HOME

ECCLESIASTES 12:5-7

כִּי הִלְךָ הָאָדָם אֶל בַּיִת עוֹלָמוֹ, וְסָבְבוּ בְּשׁוּק הַסְּפָדִים . . .
וַיֵּשֶׁב הָעֶפְרַיִם עַל הָאָרֶץ כְּשֶׁהָיָה, וְהָרוּחַ תָּשׁוּב אֶל הָאֱלֹקִים אֲשֶׁר נָתַנָּהּ.

People proceed to their eternal abodes
and the mourners go about the streets. . . .

The dust returns to the earth, as it was,
while the spirit returns to G-d, Who bestowed it.

▼ THE JEWISH CEMETERY

Jacob Isaaksz van Ruisdael, oil
on canvas, 1654–1655, Haarlem,
Netherlands. (Detroit Institute of Arts)





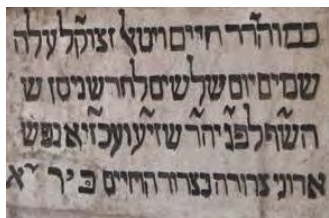
TEXT 14

RETURNING THE DEPOSIT

RABBI CHAIM VITAL, *ETS HADAAT*
TOV 358 (JERUSALEM, 2008)

RABBI CHAIM VITAL
C. 1542–1620

Lurianic kabbalist. Rabbi Vital was born in Israel, lived in Safed and Jerusalem, and later lived in Damascus. He was authorized by his teacher, Rabbi Yitschak Luria, the Arizal, to record his teachings. Acting on this mandate, Vital began arranging his master's teachings in written form, and his many works constitute the foundation of the Lurianic school of Jewish mysticism. His most famous work is *Ets Chaim*.



”כִּי עֶפֶר אַתָּה וְאֶל עֶפֶר תָּשׁוּב” (בְּרֵאשִׁית ג, יט).
כִּי גוֹף הָאָדָם מִן הָעֶפֶר הָיָה, וְדָרָךְ פְּקֻדוֹן הַיּוֹפֵקֵד בְּיַד הָאָדָם.
וּכְשֶׁמֵת צָרִיךְ לְהַחְזִיר הַפְּקֻדוֹן אֶל הָעֶפֶר אֲשֶׁר מִמֶּנּוּ לוֹקַח וּלְקוֹבְרוֹ.

“For you are dust, and you will return to dust”

(GENESIS 3:19). The body comes from the earth, and it is entrusted as a deposit to the individual's care.

Upon death, the deposit must be returned to the earth from where it came, and buried there.



TEXT 15A

FINAL WISHES

TALMUD, TAANIT 21A

מצוה לקיים דברי המת.

It is a mitzvah to implement the expressed [final] wishes of the deceased.



TEXT 15B

WHEN TO
DISREGARD

MAIMONIDES, *MISHNEH TORAH*,
LAWS OF MOURNING 12:1

אבל אם צוה שלא יקבר אין שומעין לו, שהקבורה מצוה, שנאמר, "כי קבור תקברנו".

If a person requested not to be buried, we disregard the request. This is because burial is a mitzvah, as it is stated (DEUTERONOMY 21:23), "You shall surely bury him."



Do we always need to honor the deathbed wishes of the deceased? In "Honoring their Last Wish," *Rabbi Avrohom Bergstein* provides the halachic approach: myJLI.com/soul

V. GRAVE VISITATION

Interment does not spell the end of our connection to the soul of the deceased. In fact, it even fails to disconnect us from our loved one's *physical* remains. Therefore, visiting the graves of loved ones and righteous individuals has been a permanent, hallowed feature of Jewish tradition.

Our mystical traditions reveal that a gravesite is a communication port that allows us to commune with the souls above.

▼ OLD JEWISH CEMETERY

Natan Spigel (1886–1942), watercolor and pencil on paper, (Ben Uri Gallery, London)





TEXT 16

EVOKING THE SOUL'S EMPATHY

ZOHAR 2:141B

נֶפֶשׁ דָּא אֲשֶׁתִּפְּחַת גּוֹ קְבָרָא . . .
 לְאֲשֶׁתִּפְּחָא גּוֹ חַיָּיא וּלְמִנְדַּע בְּצַעֲרָא דְלֵהוֹן,
 וּבִשְׁעֵתָא דִּי אֲצִטְרִיכוּ, בְּעֵצַת רַחֲמֵי עֲלֵיהוּ . . .
 וְכֵד אֲצִטְרִיף לְבַנֵּי עֲלֵמָא, כֵּד אֵינּוֹן בְּצַעֲרָא וְאֲזֵלִי לְבֵי קְבָרֵי,
 הָאִי נֶפֶשׁ אֲתַעֲרַת וְאִיהִי אֲזֵלָא וּמְשַׁטָּא וְאֲתַעֲרַת לְרוּחַ . . .
 וְכֵדִין קוֹדֶשׁא בְּרִיף הוּא חַיִּים עַל עֲלֵמָא.

The *nefesh* remains present in the grave. . . .

Due to the fact that it remains among the living, it is acquainted with their pain.

At their time of need, it pleads [with G-d] for mercy on their behalf. . . .

When the inhabitants of the world are in need, when they are in sorrow and visit the cemetery, the *nefesh* is aroused [to their plight]. It ascends and awakens the *ru'ach* [which, in turn, entreats G-d for mercy]. . . .

Consequently, the Holy One, blessed be He, has mercy on the world.



Why do some place pebbles on tombstones? In "The Right Place for a Stone," *Rabbi Avrohom Bergstein* sheds light: myJLI.com/soul



TEXT 17

VISITORS WELCOME

RABBI YEHUDAH BEN SHMUEL OF
REGENSBURG, *SEFER CHASIDIM*,
SECTIONS 709–710

RABBI YEHUDAH BEN SHMUEL
OF REGENSBURG
(RABBI YEHUDAH HACHASID)
1140–1217

Mystic and ethicist. Born in Speyer, Germany, he was a rabbi, mystic, and one of the initiators of *Chasidei Ashkenaz*, a Jewish German moralist movement that stressed piety and asceticism. Rabbi Yehudah settled in Regensburg in 1195. He is best known for his work *Sefer Chasidim*, on the ethics of day-to-day concerns.

קָהַל אֶחָד רָצוּ לְלַכֵּת לְמָקוֹם אֶחָד. בָּא מֵת לְאֶחָד בְּחֵלוֹם, וְאָמַר, "אֵל תַּעֲזֹבוּ
אוֹתָנוּ, כִּי יֵשׁ לָנוּ הַנָּאָה כְּשֶׁתֵּלְכוּ לְבֵית הַקְּבָרוֹת" . . .

בְּרִזְיָלִי הַגִּלְעָדִי אָמַר (שְׁמוּאֵל ב', יט, לח) "אָמוּת בְּעִירִי". כִּי הַנָּאָה יֵשׁ לְמֵתִים
שְׂאוּהֶבִים הוֹלְכִים עַל קְבָרֵיהֶם וּמְבַקְשִׁים לְנִשְׁמָתָן טוֹבָה, מְטִיבִים לָהֶם בְּאוֹתוֹ
עֲנִין. וְגַם כְּשֶׁמְבַקְשִׁים עֲלֵיהֶם, הֵם מֵתְפַלְלִים עַל הַחַיִּים.

There was once a community that wished to relocate. One of the deceased [buried in the vicinity] appeared in a dream to a member of the community and pleaded, "Please do not abandon us, for we appreciate your visits to our cemetery." . . .

Barzilai the Giladite declared, "I would like to die in my own city" (II SAMUEL 19:38). He wished for this because the deceased appreciate when their loved ones visit their graves and request goodness for their souls; this improves their condition in Heaven. And when we pray on behalf of the deceased, they pray for us in turn.

VI. CONCLUSION

If there is one piece of writing that encapsulates the overarching theme that emerges from the above study—with a blend of insight, sensitivity, and practical direction—it is a 1958 letter sent by the Lubavitcher Rebbe to a grieving woman.



TEXT 18

A SCIENTIFIC ARGUMENT

THE REBBE, RABBI MENACHEM
MENDEL SCHNEERSON,
CORRESPONDENCE, 29 SIVAN,
5718 [JUNE 17, 1958]

Blessing and Greeting:

I received your undated letters, in which you write about your emotional upsets in connection with the passing of your mother, and the questions which are troubling you in this connection, involving also questions in regard to the passing of your father, peace unto them. . . .

Another fundamental point to remember, which has a direct bearing on your letter, is that all believers in G-d believe also in the survival of the soul. Actually, this principle has even been discovered in this physical world, where science now holds, as an absolute truth, that nothing in the physical world can be absolutely destroyed. How much more so in the spiritual world, especially in the case of the soul, which in no way can be affected by the death and disintegration of the physical body. It would be silly and illogical to assume that, because a certain organ of the body ceases to function, affecting other physical organs of the body,

the spiritual soul would also be affected thereby. The truth is that when the physical body ceases to function, the soul continues its existence, not only as before, but even on a higher level, inasmuch as it is no longer handicapped by the restraints of the physical frame.

Thirdly, the attachment of children to their parents, and the general attachment between close relatives during life on this earth, is surely not a physical attachment by the respective physical bodies of the relatives. Essentially, the attachment is a spiritual one, due to the spiritual affinity between those concerned, and the qualities of the soul, including such spiritual things as character, kindness, goodness, etc., all of which are attributes of the soul, and not of the body. Therefore, also, every action on the part of a person in relation to a beloved person, and the desire to benefit that person, is not directed towards pleasing his physical body, his bones and tissue, for it is the spiritual pleasure that one is concerned with.

In view of the above, it is clear that even after the physical body has disintegrated and disappeared from view, it is still possible to bring joy and benefit to the soul, which, as noted above, not only survives, but does so on a higher level, and all the things which had previously brought joy and pleasure to one's parents, will continue to do so even after they are physically no longer here.

**EXERCISE 2.1**

1. Record the insight from this lesson that resonated with you most.

2. Is there a deceased person with whom you wish to strengthen your bond of love? What step can you take to do so?

KEY POINTS

- 1** *Nefesh* and *ru'ach* are two of the soul's components. After death, the *nefesh* remains with the body, while the *ru'ach* disengages and ascends to Gan Eden (Paradise).
- 2** Once the *ru'ach* is no longer limited to material existence, it is more accessible to all who wish to connect to it. Thus, when a person dies, our ability to spiritually connect with him or her is stronger and deeper than before.
- 3** Though the *nefesh* remains in the grave, it retains a connection with the higher levels of the soul. The gravesite is thus a portal where we can communicate with departed souls and ask them to intercede before G-d on our behalf.
- 4** Over the course of a lifetime, the soul and body integrate and bond; their separation at death is therefore painful for the soul.
- 5** The soul departs the body in stages. These stages correspond to the prescribed periods of mourning. When we mourn, we are mourning not only for the deceased but also *with* the deceased.

KEY POINTS CONTINUED

- 6** Dignity and sensitivity are the underlying principles that guide the care of a corpse and its preparation for burial. This is because even after death, the body retains its special status of having been the container for the soul.
- 7** Burial is of highest priority in Jewish tradition and culture. When G-d takes a person's soul, we are tasked to return the body to the place from which G-d fashioned it.
- 8** Burial affirms two fundamental Jewish beliefs: (a) our bodies aren't ours—they belong to G-d; (b) there will be a Resurrection of the Dead in the messianic era.

APPENDIX



TEXT 19

PROHIBITION AGAINST TATTOOS

LEVITICUS 19:28

וְכַתְּבֶתָּ קֶעֶקֶע
לֹא תִתְּנוּ בְּכֶם.

Do not inflict a tattoo
on your bodies.

ADDITIONAL READINGS



END-OF-LIFE: MANAGING MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL NEEDS

Complete end-of-life care also includes helping the dying person manage mental and emotional distress. Someone who is alert near the end of life might understandably feel depressed or anxious. It is important to treat emotional pain and suffering. Encouraging conversations about feelings might help. You might want to contact a counselor, possibly one familiar with end-of-life issues. If the depression or anxiety is severe, medicine may help.

A dying person may also have some specific fears and concerns. He or she may fear the unknown or worry about those left behind. Some people are afraid of being alone at the very end. This feeling can be made worse by the understandable reactions of family, friends, and even the medical team. For example, when family and friends do not know how to help or what to say, sometimes they stop visiting. Or, someone who is already beginning to grieve may withdraw.

Doctors may feel helpless because they can't cure their patient. Some seem to avoid a dying patient. This can add to a dying person's sense of isolation. If this is happening, discuss your concerns with the family, friends, or the doctor.

The simple act of physical contact—holding hands, a touch, or a gentle massage—can make a person feel connected to those he or she loves. It can be very soothing.

Warm your hands by rubbing them together or running them under warm water.

Try to set a comforting mood. Remember that listening and being present can make a difference. For example, Gordon loved a party, so it was natural for him to want to be around family and friends when he was dying. Ellen always liked spending quiet moments with one or two people at a time, so she was most comfortable with just a few visitors.

Some experts suggest that when death is very near, music at a low volume and soft lighting are soothing. In fact, near the end of life, music therapy might improve mood, help with relaxation, and lessen pain. Listening to music might also evoke memories those present can share. For some people, keeping distracting noises like televisions and radios to a minimum is important.

Often, just being present with a dying person is enough. It may not be necessary to fill the time with talking or activity. Your quiet presence can be a simple and profound gift for a dying family member or friend.

Spiritual Needs at the End of Life

People nearing the end of life may have spiritual needs as important as their physical concerns. Spiritual needs include finding meaning in one's life and ending disagreements with others, if possible. The dying

person might find peace by resolving unsettled issues with friends or family. Visits from a social worker or a counselor may also help.

Many people find solace in their faith. Others may struggle with their faith or spiritual beliefs. Praying, talking with someone from one's religious community (such as a minister, priest, rabbi, or imam), reading religious texts, or listening to religious music may bring comfort.

Family and friends can talk to the dying person about the importance of their relationship. For example, adult children can share how their father has influenced the course of their lives. Grandchildren can

let their grandfather know how much he has meant to them. Friends can relate how they value years of support and companionship. Family and friends who can't be present could send a recording of what they would like to say or a letter to be read out loud.

Sharing memories of good times is another way some people find peace near death. This can be comforting for everyone. Some doctors think it is possible that even if a patient is unconscious, he or she might still be able to hear. It is probably never too late to say how you feel or to talk about fond memories.

Excerpted from <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/providing-comfort-end-life#emotional>



SHE IS PURE

BY MIRIAM KARP

MIRIAM KARP

Writer and artist. Karp is an award-winning writer, artist, teacher, and lecturer. Her paintings explore intimate moments in Jewish life. She authored a personal memoir, *Painting Zaidy's Dream: A Memoir of a Searching Soul*, in which she shares her journey toward becoming Torah observant.

The years went on, the kids started to grow up. We gave away our last few disposable diapers, at long last. What a different phase, in so many ways. Little kids, little problems; big kids, big problems, the saying goes. It's true that as the children grew into more complex beings, their issues couldn't be solved with a lollipop and a kiss. I did miss the dizzy, delicious baby-on-the-hip days, much as it was a blur and hard to even believe that it had all transpired. But we savored and enjoyed the richness of our emerging people.

Finally, all the kids were in school—all day. I had time to branch out in new directions. A good friend regularly performed the *mitzvah* of *tahara*/purification, preparing a Jewish body for burial. I'd wanted to try this important task, but kept putting it off for . . . later. This wasn't one of the mitzvos that all observant

people did such as keeping kosher, Shabbos, eating matzah on Passover, and so on. It was extra, voluntary—a *mitzvah* usually handled by more mature women, because of their freer schedules, and probably also because of their said maturity. As I rounded the corner on fifty, mortality wasn't a far off abstract notion that had little to do with me. My mom was struggling with dementia and decline. I had lost some close friends. So when Tamar asked if I might be willing to try this practice out, I gulped and hesitantly said yes. "Good," she said briskly. "Malka told me you were thinking about it. The first time you mostly just watch, and the women will help guide you. How 'bout tomorrow morning? We need a fourth. Na'ama will pick you up at 9:00. Okay?"

"Sure," I answered, sounding more confident than I was. Early the next morning, Na'ama honked right

on time. She took side-roads for our half-hour trip, avoiding rush hour traffic. We pulled into the funeral home parking lot, going around to the back. Na'ama punched the code to the rear door, and we entered the quiet building. Several empty caskets were in the hallway. I followed the women into a utilitarian room, with a cupboard, sinks, and a concrete floor. We washed our hands, put on plastic aprons and latex gloves. They examined the name of the deceased, left on a piece of paper on the counter. I recognized it—I had visited her several times during her month of decline and knew her somewhat. Would it be easier or harder to do this on someone I had known?

There was no time to think. Ruth opened the heavy door of the walk-in refrigerated room that adjoined our work room. We entered. Two *meisim*/newly deceased lay in that chilly room, covered with sheets. I recognized Rachel's bulky shape.

Suddenly, everyone else faded into the background. I was only aware of her and me.

I took a deep breath and followed the three women. They wheeled Rachel into the preparation room. I followed, a bit nervously.

I had been touched and intrigued when I first heard about this ritual, back in the early days of Chassidic immersion. Soon enough, Yankel and I were busily pouring all our energies into building a Jewish homestead. I was focused on pregnancies and nursing—busy with the kids and their constant needs. I was nurturing life, not yet physically or emotionally ready to deal with its end.

But now, I felt more or less ready, and somewhat obligated to try. Obligated because purifying the deceased was a sacred ritual, performed with care by Jews all over the world. Some unknown *tahara* team had done it for my grandparents and in-laws, *alehem hashalom*. In our small community, we all shared the joys and responsibilities of Torah life, and every set of willing hands counted.

Alehem hashalom, may they rest in peace. According to Jewish law and tradition, the living helped the soul get ready to rest in peace, by preparing its earthly home—the body—with well-defined rituals of cleansing and dressing in simple shrouds.

These rituals were done with the utmost dignity, privacy, and respect. Rather than making an attractive façade for the funeral, they focused on purity and simplicity, each step suffused with deep Kabbalistic meaning.

I knew all this. In my head. But I still wasn't sure, could I really do it?

To be honest, I wasn't here just for altruistic reasons, beautiful and compelling as they were. Helping the dead was called *Chesed Shel Emes*—true kindness: you gave with no possibility of being paid back. I had my own reasons, beyond noble acts and shouldering my share of community responsibility; I wanted to expand my spiritual horizons.

Maybe I'd hone in on the real essence, become a truer wife and mother, waste less energy on trivialities; swallow and internalize a greater appreciation for the gift of life. Less kvetching even. Perhaps this encounter with mortality would make me a more sensitive artist and writer. I was now a reputedly respectable figure, a rabbi's wife and Jewish educator busily mining the treasures of Jewish mysticism and living. Every now and then, I still longed for those *wow man* really intense experiences, like *far out—awesome—extreme*; albeit in a Jewish way. Surely helping a soul and its body in this transition would meet the bill. The burial committee was traditionally called the *Chevra Kadisha*—the holy society. With a name like that, I reckoned, they must be privy to some deep, mysterious truths.

The *tahara* turned out to be like most of Jewish life, where searching for rarified or transcendent “Spirituality” wasn't exactly it—was kind of off the mark.

Was it profound, quiet, hushed; *Spiritual*? Yes—and no.

The *tahara* was surprisingly prosaic. Earthy. Even ordinary. Na'ama, the group leader, a brisk and efficient woman, helped dispel my initial discomfort by referring to Rachel as “her.” “Move her over here,” she instructed. “Hold up her head.”

There was nothing macabre about the scene, though my subconscious offered up images from different horror movies, accompanied by a Gothic organ's pitched tone. It wasn't a staged “religious service,”

with the choir marching quietly in perfect formation. We were about to help a real woman, a she, a person. We had a job to do.

Watching my experienced partners' faces, for a cue in this new universe, I felt both humbled and relieved: humbled by their ability to just step up, assess the situation, and figure out the best way to proceed, with earnest and every day kind of caring. Relieved to see them show signs of compassion, even distress, at some of the bodily signs of the suffering Rachel must have endured these last few months. It was hard for them too. But they each took a breath and continued.

The first glance at her was hard. The first touch was hard.

The other women started washing Rachel with washcloths, keeping as much of her face and body covered as possible at any one moment, respecting her privacy, even now. Initially I stood back, watching with hands folded. I knew it would be best to jump right in, so as they turned Rachel to wash her back, I reached out tentatively and held her hand to keep it from flopping over.

The words dead weight and rigor mortis echoed through my mind. Rachel's hand was cold, heavy, and stiff. I imagined holding a living hand that had the pulse of life flowing through it. This was different.

I helped more and more, as we proceeded, following my friends' spoken and intuited guidance. As we gently washed her body, a body that had lived and loved and borne children, it seemed almost like bathing an infant, with its total dependence, as we hovered protectively around.

Trying to talk only as necessary, we gave each other instructions in subdued, focused voices. The quiet was punctuated by coughs, sighs, the sound of water filling the buckets, the snap of latex gloves.

We took off whatever bandages we could, along with other substances that would block the purifying water, so it could cover her as completely as possible. Removing her frosted pink nail polish was like stripping away her earthly life. I imagined a kind nurse or grandchild sitting patiently with Rachel and applying this reassuring slick coat of certainty and vanity on her worn, fading hand.

That was all behind her now.

In a non-broken sequence, Na'ama, Ruth, and Malka poured cascading buckets of water from the *mikveh*/ritual bath from her head to toe. "*Tahara hee*—she is pure," they intoned. Over and over in almost a chant—rhythmically, asserting, defining. The sound of the water splashing against the metal table accenting the words.

Pausing at several points, Na'ama murmured several prayers and parts of Psalms, the familiar sounds of the ancient Hebrew washing over Rachel and clothing her in a cocoon of comfort. We listened, understanding the intent, even if we couldn't translate each word. Our wishes for this woman cushioned and cloaked her as well.

Then, we gently patted her dry. Ruth brushed her hair. I watched the wet grey-white hair spring into soft, fine curls. This tender act was touching, like giving a small child that final mother's touch. Working together, we dressed Rachel in *tachrichim*, simple white linen garments: tunic, pants, gown, bonnet—each put on and tied in a special way.

We gently lowered her into the unadorned wooden casket. Fulfilling the Biblical declaration, "from the dust you came, to the dust you shall return," holes were drilled in the bottom of the casket, allowing the body contact with the dust of the earth.

Na'ama placed a shard of pottery on each of Rachel's eyes and on her mouth, symbolizing human frailty. Golden sand from the land of Israel was lightly sprinkled over her. We covered Rachel's face with a piece of the linen, and asked her to forgive us for any rough or disrespectful handling. We wished her a speedy journey to *Olam HaBah*—the world to come.

Lifting the heavy casket cover and positioning it onto its fastening pegs felt like an act of finality. Ruth opened the door to the refrigerated room. The whoosh and blast of cold air was startling, breaking the meditative mood. We wheeled Rachel inside, where she would wait for the next step of her voyage.

Stepping out of that quiet, windowless room into daylight, time, and schedules, we collected our purses and cell phones, and stepped back into our day; a sunny summer one.

The casual chatter on the drive home seemed strange after such intensity. But I soon relaxed, realizing the conversation offered a soothing transition. What we had shared did not really need to be put into words. Easing back to daily reality, I drew a blank when Malka asked me, “So, how was it for you?” I had to stop and think. How was what? Oh yeah. I just did a *tahara*. “It was okay,” I said with a quiet smile, downplaying my inner relief that I’d made it through, which melded together with my sense of accomplishment.

I felt buoyed throughout the day. Catching up on the phone with Devora Leah, now a new mother, I told her, “I did my first *tahara*.”

She gasped. “Really?”

But, it wasn’t a gasp type thing, not of horror, and not of an *Oh wow* mystical high. It was an ordinary, extraordinary thing to do. Rachel’s image flittered through my mind once or twice. Not morbid. Just an image of a friend I was glad to have helped.

Early Thursday, I awoke and remembered her. I said *Modeh Ani*, expressing thanks for the new day. No rote recital this time; I really felt it.

Rachel was in her place in G-d’s universe—stripped down to her essence, purified of her worldly concerns. And I was thankful to be in mine: unfinished business, chaos, imperfection, and all.



WHY DOES JEWISH LAW FORBID CREMATION?

BY RABBI NAFTALI SILBERBERG

NAFTALI SILBERBERG

Noted author and lecturer. Rabbi Naftali Silberberg is the codirector of curriculum for the Rohr Jewish Learning Institute and coeditor in chief of its Flagship division.

Question:

I’m in the process of making arrangements for my final resting place. In my family, some of my relatives have opted for a traditional Jewish burial, while others have chosen the route of cremation. While researching my options, I’ve discovered that Judaism is vehemently opposed to cremation. Can you please explain to me the origins and reasons for this stance?

Answer:

Before I respond to your question regarding the background of the Jewish prohibition against cremation, allow me to make some prefatory remarks:

In order to help clarify some of the issues, I am choosing to explain the topic “as is,” i.e., as they appear in the “Big Books.” Commenting on

the particulars of one’s experience may need additional questions clarified and is often best done in person with a rabbi more familiar with the particular person or family.

Thus, if anything that I will write will come across as insensitive, I beg your forgiveness in advance. That is clearly not my intention.

The laws I will attempt to present here are a distillation of rabbinic writings over the years. In terms of some of the deeper reflection on the human body and its role that I hope to provide—that is distilled from deep Chabad discourses, though I can hardly assert that my distillation of this lofty concept is categorically correct. Jewish law (“Halachah”) is unequivocal that the dead must be buried in the earth.¹

As a deterrent measure,² cremated remains are not interred in

a Jewish cemetery.³ Furthermore, we are told that many of the traditional laws of mourning are not observed after the passing of an individual whose body was cremated.⁴ *Kaddish*, however, is recited for such individuals, and it is certainly appropriate to give charity and do *mitzvot* in memory of their souls.⁵

Responsibility for the deceased's proper burial lies with the next of kin.⁶ While ordinarily Jewish law requires the deceased's children to go to great lengths to respect the departed's wishes,⁷ if someone requests to be cremated or buried in a manner which is not in accordance with Jewish tradition, we nevertheless provide him/her with a Jewish burial.⁸ It is believed that since the soul has now arrived to the World of Truth, it surely sees the value of a proper Jewish burial, and thus administering a traditional Jewish burial is actually granting what the person truly wishes at the moment. Furthermore, if anyone, all the more so your father and mother, asks you to damage or hurt their body, you are not allowed to do so. For our bodies do not belong to us, they belong to G-d.

[It is important to note that according to Jewish law, a person is only held accountable for his/her actions when they are done willingly, and with full cognizance of their implications.⁹ Therefore, all the above does not apply to an individual who was cremated against his will. After the Holocaust, many conscientious Jews gathered ashes from the extermination camp crematoria and respectfully buried them in Jewish cemeteries. Recently, too, I heard of an instance where a hospital mistakenly cremated a Jewish body. With rabbinic sanction the ashes were put into a coffin and given a proper Jewish burial.

Furthermore, an individual who was raised in a non-religious atmosphere and was never accorded a proper Jewish education cannot be held responsible for his or her lack of observance.¹⁰ This general rule applies to individuals who opt to be cremated because their education and upbringing did not equip them with the knowledge necessary to make an informed choice in this area. This assumption impacts some of the legal results presented above.]

The Biblical Commandment

Man's soul comes from Above, "He breathed into his nostrils the soul of life,"¹¹ and when its earthly mission has been accomplished it rises back to G-d, returning to its source.

The body, on the other hand, was taken from the ground—"the L-rd G-d formed man of dust from the ground"¹²—and must therefore return to the earth. This is expressed in the words that G-d tells Adam, the first man,¹³ "For dust you are, and to dust you will return."

This concept is reiterated in Deuteronomy,¹⁴ where we are commanded to bury the dead: "You shall bury him on that day." The Jerusalem Talmud¹⁵ explains that this requires us to bury the body in its entirety, not after it has been diminished through cremation or in any other manner: "You must bury him in entirety, not partially. From this verse we extrapolate that the command was not fulfilled if the person was partially buried."

Cremating a body destroys most of the body, making burial of the flesh impossible, and thus violates the biblical command.

Our Responsibilities Vis-à-Vis the Human Body

In Jewish law, the human body belongs to its Creator. It is merely on loan to the person, who is the guardian of the body, but he or she has no right to deface it in any way.¹⁶ The body must be "returned" in its entirety, just as it was given.¹⁷

Additionally, Man was created in "G-d's image and likeness."¹⁸ Any violation of the human body is considered, therefore, to be a violation of G-d Himself.¹⁹

This general principle and law governs many of our laws, like those prohibiting self-mutilation²⁰ or tattoos,²¹ and requiring us to do our utmost to keep ourselves from danger by maintaining proper hygiene and the like.²² This principle applies after death, too; any mutilation of the dead is prohibited.²³

This is also one of the reasons why Jewish law does not permit autopsies²⁴ other than in the most extenuating of circumstances.²⁵

Utmost respect for the sanctity of the human body is also the overriding concern which pervades the process of preparing the deceased for burial. The

funeral is scheduled for the earliest possible time, ideally on the same day as the passing,²⁶ so that the body reaches its eternal rest as expeditiously as possible. The honor of caring for the dead is traditionally reserved for the most respected members of the community,²⁷ who are expected to maintain the highest levels of decorum, privacy, and respect throughout the entire process.

According to traditional Jewish sources, the merit of facilitating the proper burial of a Jewish corpse is immeasurable. Even the High Priest, who was even prohibited from attending the funerals of his next of kin, was *required* to preoccupy himself and personally bury a *met mitzvah*, an abandoned Jewish body that had no one to attend to its proper burial.²⁸

No lengthy explanation is necessary to conclude that there can be no greater violation of our legal and moral responsibilities to the body's Owner than to cremate.

Delving Deeper into Our Relationship with Our Bodies

When the body becomes the soul's vehicle to do good deeds ("mitzvot") it—the body—is invested with permanent value and sanctity. The body is seen as sacred, as the temple of the soul, and the medium by which we do goodness in this world. According to Jewish law, an object which facilitated the fulfillment of a mitzvah must be accorded respect, and cannot be casually discarded. Examples: papers upon which are inscribed words of Torah, *tzitzit* fringes, or leather *tefillin* straps. Such articles must be buried with due respect. How much more does this idea apply to a body. In the words of the Talmud,²⁹ "even the wicked among [the Jewish people] are full of mitzvot"! Or, to quote the prophet Isaiah:³⁰ "And your nation are *all* righteous people."

On a deeper level, as Jews, we believe there is purpose to life, purpose to this world, purpose to the act of creation.

There are other belief systems that view the body and all the other physical trappings of this world, and the temptations they present, only as strategic challenges set in the soul's path, in order to overcome

these challenges en route to a heavenly paradise. As such, the body has no intrinsic worth of its own, and once its function has been fully served, it retains no value whatsoever.

Jewish belief also recognizes the importance of the soul's reward earned through its life-journey,³¹ but sees the refinement of the body and this physical world as the paramount objective.³² The soul was dispatched from its heavenly abode to infuse these otherwise mundane entities with holiness and purpose. While, the soul, too, is elevated to previously unimaginable heights through fulfilling its worldly mission,³³ it is the sanctification of the physical—both the body and the world at large—that constitutes the very reason for Creation.

The Penultimate Bodily Experience

Two of the most fundamental tenets of the Jewish faith are the belief in the ultimate redemption of the Jewish people—and of all of mankind—through a righteous messiah,³⁴ and the concept of the resurrection of the dead, an awaited time when all souls will return to their bodies.³⁵ These beliefs are so central to the Jewish worldview that Maimonides considers them to be two of the thirteen principles of the Jewish faith.³⁶

The Messianic Era will be ushered in by a righteous scion of King David,³⁷ and will be characterized by world peace and harmony. "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nations shall not lift the sword against nation; neither shall they learn war anymore."³⁸ The Jewish people will be gathered from all corners of the earth and will be returned to the Promised Land,³⁹ where the Holy Temple will be rebuilt in Jerusalem.⁴⁰

This era will be the culmination of G-d's master plan for Creation.⁴¹ We will then be able to enjoy the fruits of our labor; we will then see the end-product of our millennia-long labor of permeating Creation with holiness and purpose. The curtain will be ripped aside, and the flesh, our very own bodies, will perceive G-d: "And the glory of the L-rd shall be revealed, and all flesh together shall see that the mouth of the L-rd spoke."⁴²

These beliefs have sustained our nation throughout a 2,000-year exile fraught with pogroms, expulsions, and persecution. Just one generation ago countless Jews entered the gas chambers whilst singing “*Ani Ma'amin*” (“I believe . . .”)—expressing their firm belief in a better time to come and their trust that they would be resurrected to witness that awaited day.

Cremation is an implied statement of rejection of the concept of resurrection. It is in effect a declaration that once the soul has departed the body, the lifeless body has served its purpose and now has no further value.⁴³

Our Sages teach that those who deny the notion of the resurrection will not merit to be resurrected⁴⁴ within their own bodies, rather their souls will be enclothed in different bodies when that awaited day arrives.⁴⁵ Based on this idea, many authorities conclude that a person who opts for cremation is subject to this consequence as well.⁴⁶

(However, this applies only to such instances where the cremation was done at the behest of the deceased; only in such instances can it be said that the person rejected the notion of the resurrection, etc. Not too long ago six million of our people were denied proper burial, most of them cremated. Without a doubt these holy martyrs will be at the forefront of those who will return during the Messianic Redemption.)

Additional Prohibition and Concepts

- A. We are commanded in the Torah⁴⁷ not to follow the practices of the non-Jews. Cremating the dead was (and, in fact, still is) a ritual observed by many pagan cultures, and thus is also a violation of this biblical prohibition.⁴⁸
- B. According to Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism), the soul does not depart the body immediately after death.⁴⁹ Such an abrupt departure would be intensely painful for the soul. The gradual decomposition of the body allows the soul the time to slowly depart the body and acclimate itself to its new heavenly abode.⁵⁰ The instant destruction of the body caused by cremation deprives the soul of this much-needed adjustment period.
- C. Throughout our history, a traditional Jewish burial, known as *Kever Yisrael*, was always considered a highest priority. During times when many of their non-Jewish co-citizens regularly cremated their dead, the Jews were distinguishable by their commitment to bury their dead with dignity. This fact was already noted by Tacitus, the famed 1st century Roman historian.⁵¹ Understanding the great importance of this mitzvah, the Israeli army is known to take great risks, venturing behind enemy lines to bring back to Israel the bodies of their fallen comrades.

It is safe to assume that the deceased's soul is certain to evoke heavenly mercy and blessings upon those individuals who ensured that its body was accorded its final proper respects.

To sum up:

Cremation

- is a transgression of a Biblical law to bury our dead,
- demonstrates a rejection of G-d's supreme “ownership” over all of Creation,
- violates our legal responsibility to return what was loaned to us (our bodies) in as wholesome a state as possible,
- constitutes a rejection of the Jewish belief of *tzelem Elokim* (created in G-d's image),
- constitutes a rejection of the Jewish belief in resurrection of the dead,
- (if done voluntarily, knowing fully the responsibilities) will cause the body not to be included among the Jewish People when the time of resurrection arrives,
- violates the biblical prohibition of following heathen practices,
- upends the soul's natural separation and acclimation process, thus causing it additional untold pain,
- deviates from Jewish history and our forebears' and contemporaries' selfless and heroic efforts to properly bury our dead, and
- declares, in effect, that once the soul has departed the body, the lifeless body has no further value.

May we soon merit seeing the day when this whole discussion is rendered inapplicable, for G-d will “conceal death forever, and the L-rd G-d shall wipe the tears off every face.”⁵²

Reprinted with permission from Chabad.org

Endnotes

- ¹ Code of Jewish Law, Yoreh Deah 348:3; 362:1.
- ² The rabbinic responsibility to institute ordinances to deter people from violating Biblical commands is referenced in Mishna, Avot 1:1; Talmud Yevamot 21a, based on Leviticus 18:30.
- ³ Melamed L'hoil Vol 2 #114 (Responsa of Rabbi David Hoffman, 1843–1921, noted German authority on Jewish law). Whether or not there is an obligation to bury the ashes elsewhere, in order to prevent further disgrace, is the subject of dispute between halachic authorities.
- ⁴ This is based on the principle (quoted in the Code of Jewish Law, Yoreh De'ah 345:5) that we do not mourn after individuals who have “strayed from the ways of the community” (Responsa Minchat Elazar, vol. 2 ch. 34).
- ⁵ Chatam Sofer Responsa (by Rabbi Moses Sofer, 1762–1839, famed rabbi of Pressburg, Slovakia), vol. 3 (Even Ha'ezer 1) ch. 69.
- ⁶ Code of Jewish Law, Yoreh Deah 348:2.
- ⁷ E.g. Code of Jewish Law, Yoreh Deah 349:2.
- ⁸ Code of Jewish Law, Yoreh Deah 348:3 (See Jerusalem Talmud Ketubot 11:1).
- ⁹ Talmud Nedarim 27a; Bava Kamma 28b; Avodah Zarah 54a; deduced from Deuteronomy 22:26.
- ¹⁰ Talmud Shabbat 68b; Maimonides, Laws of Mamrim 3:3.
- ¹¹ Genesis 2:7.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Genesis 3:19. This is also the reason why Jewish law advocates the use of a wooden casket, which will fully disintegrate.
- ¹⁴ 21:23.
- ¹⁵ Nazir 7:1.
- ¹⁶ See Maimonides, Laws of Murder 1:4; Ridvaz, Laws of Sanhedrin 18; Shulchan Aruch Harav (by Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi) Laws of Body Damages 4.
- ¹⁷ Adapted from a letter by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, of righteous memory, dated 26 Nissan 5729 (1969).
- ¹⁸ Genesis 1:27.
- ¹⁹ See Genesis 9:6.
- ²⁰ Deuteronomy 14:1.
- ²¹ Leviticus 19:28.
- ²² Maimonides, Laws of Murder 11:5; Code of Jewish Law, Yoreh De'ah 427:9-10.
- ²³ Deduced from Deuteronomy 21:23. See Da'at Cohen, Responsa of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1864–1935, Israel's first Chief Rabbi).
- ²⁴ The Talmud (Bava Batra 115a) relates: It once happened that a person sold his deceased father's estate, and then died himself. The other family members claimed that he was a minor at the time of death and was therefore unauthorized to sell the property. The rabbis did not allow them, however, to medically examine the body to determine his age. “You are not permitted to dishonor him,” Rabbi Akiba said.

From here we infer that it is forbidden to modify the body of the deceased in any manner even if it would lead to tangible results.

The Talmud (Chullin 11b) also discusses the possibility of performing an autopsy on a murder victim to ascertain the state of the victim's health at the time of the murder. The result of this autopsy could have possibly affected the murderer's punishment. The Talmud objects on grounds of disrespect toward the dead and concludes that only in the theoretical event that the autopsy would actually serve to *save* the murderer (considering the premium Jewish law places on saving lives) would it be allowed.

See also Noda B'Yehudah Y.D. 210; Chatam Sofer Y.D. 336.

²⁵ The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains in the previously cited letter (fn 17) that in those very rare cases “where an exception was made to the rule, it was because of special reasons, which in no way diminished the sanctity and inviolability of the body, as G-d's property, but only because under special circumstances, G-d Himself has permitted certain isolated exceptions, in which case it is the Owner's will that is being carried out, namely G-d's will.”

²⁶ Deuteronomy 21:23; Code of Jewish Law, Yoreh De'ah 357:1.

²⁷ Kol Bo p. 175; Hadrat Kodesh 3a.

²⁸ Maimonides, Laws of Mourning 3:6.

²⁹ End of tractate Chagigah.

³⁰ 60:21.

³¹ Maimonides even considers the concept of the soul's reward to be a principle Jewish belief.

³² Tanya (by Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, 1745–1812, founder of Chabad chassidic movement), ch. 36.

³³ See Likutei Torah (Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi), Deuteronomy 29a.

³⁴ Maimonides, Laws of Kings 11:1, based on Deuteronomy 30:3-5; ibid. 19:8; Numbers 24:17-18; and, to quote Maimonides, “from the words of the Prophets it is unnecessary to bring proof, for all their books are filled with this concept.”

³⁵ The Talmud, Sanhedrin 90b–91b, brings multiple scriptural proofs for the resurrection.

³⁶ Introduction to his commentary on “Chapter *Chelek*” in tractate Sanhedrin.

³⁷ Isaiah 11:1; Maimonides, Laws of Kings 11:1.

³⁸ Micah 4:3.

³⁹ Deuteronomy 30:3-4.

⁴⁰ Maimonides, ibid.

⁴¹ Tanya, ch. 36.

⁴² Isaiah 40:5.

⁴³ *Achiezer* Vol. 3 #72 (Responsa of Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinski, early 20th century Lithuanian rabbi); Beit Yitzchok, Yoreh Deah Vol. 2 #155.

⁴⁴ Mishna, tractate Sanhedrin 10:1.

⁴⁵ See *Igrot Kodesh* by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, vol. 1 p. 142–153.

⁴⁶ See *Minchat Elazar* responsa cited above in footnote 3.

⁴⁷ Leviticus 18:3.

⁴⁸ See *S'dei Chemed* encyclopedia, “Mourning” entry.

⁴⁹ *Zohar I* 122b.

⁵⁰ Jerusalem Talmud Mo'ed Kattan 3:5.

⁵¹ *Hist.* 5:5.

⁵² Isaiah 25:8.