

# Jewish Funerals: A Ritual Description

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Note: this is a preliminary exploration, attempting an analytic description of contemporary traditional Jewish practice with occasional glances at its historical development. Although there exist numerous popular "how to" manuals, as of December 2000 when this paper was written, scholarly literature on Jewish funerary practices was sparse and problematic, consisting of two studies of rabbinic customs<sup>1</sup> and one study of the early modern burial society in Prague.<sup>2</sup> Without question, the actual liturgies of today's Jewish funerals (and the theologies of life and death they reflect) developed in the unstudied millennium between these studies<sup>3</sup>—a gap I look forward to addressing in the future. Note too that the published version of this paper omitted all underdotted letters entirely. Here, I have transliterated the Hebrew letters *het* and *tzadi* as "h" and "z" respectively.

Among all "life-cycle" events in traditional forms of Judaism, the rituals surrounding death are at the same time the most tightly choreographed and the least liturgical. While, in general, Jewish rituals tend to be accompanied by a relative torrent of encoded verbal prayers, the performance of funerary rituals are striking in their combinations of silence and free speech. The result is the creation of a time that is markedly different, that responds powerfully to the emotions of the moment, and that effects the dual transition of accompanying the deceased to the grave and only then of comforting the mourners. The funeral service per se cannot justifiably be separated from this larger process which begins at the moment of death<sup>4</sup> and ends as the mourners gradually resume all aspects of normal life.

Like all other Jewish rituals, those surrounding death represent an accumulation of authoritative biblical and rabbinic precedents combined with later accretions less universally required. Although in the case of funerals, we can point to a few early Palestinian rabbinic (tannaitic) rituals that were abandoned, mostly because later talmudic rabbis (Amoraim), especially in Babylonia, did not know them, this is not the norm. Although there have been significant changes in theologies of the afterlife and consequent additions (but still rarely subtractions!) of liturgical texts, the fundamental pattern of Jewish death rituals has remained remarkably constant over at least two millennia.

## Accompanying the Dead

Two rabbinically defined *mitzvot* (commandments) drive communal involvement in Jewish funeral rituals: *halvayat hamet* (accompanying the dead [to the grave]) and *nihum avelim* (comforting the mourners), both encompassing numerous other *mitzvot*. In addition, the rabbis very closely prescribed appropriate behavior for the mourners themselves. This complex of intersecting commands effects first the transition of deceased from the world of the living to the world of the dead/afterlife;<sup>5</sup> and, second, it places the mourners into a liminal state from which they gradually emerge to reintegrate into a social realm reshaped by their loss.

From the point that a person dies, not only the immediate family, but also the community collectively, has a responsibility to ensure that that person is buried properly, showing the greatest respect to the body which had housed life. In most communities today (and this has been true for many centuries), this is the task of a special voluntary burial society, the *hevra kaddisha* (holy society).<sup>6</sup> Although today they usually perform their tasks at a funeral home, the rituals were designed to take place in the home of the deceased. This group of men (for a man) or women (for a woman), in silence<sup>7</sup> and with maximum concern for the deceased's modesty, first wash the body, and then ritually purify it by pouring over it quantities of water, dress it in white shrouds (and prayer shawl for a man), place it in a plain wooden coffin (if any coffin is used)<sup>8</sup> and close the coffin. During the entire *tahara* (purification), the only words spoken are a few brief prayers and appropriate biblical verses.<sup>9</sup> This relative silence developed from a sense that the deceased's soul has not yet left the body entirely and can hear — and be grieved — by words spoken in its presence. The family and community also supply *shomerim*, watchers, who sit with the body from the time of death until the funeral begins, quietly reciting Psalms — maintaining a focused silence.

Nissan Rubin speaks of this as a liminal period for the deceased. The body is treated both with signs that it is still connected to life and with acknowledgement that the person has died. Washing (and in antiquity, anointing) are actions connected with life. The rabbis assumed that the person could still grow hair and nails, hear, and feel pain, both physically and emotionally. Hence there is no idle conversation, eating, or study of Torah in the presence of the body. At the same time, the death is real. Dramatic signs of this traditionally include: removal of the deceased's pillow, placing the body on the ground instead of leaving it on the bed, tying shut the deceased's mouth if necessary and plugging bodily orifices. It is preferably the child's job to close a parent's eyes, covering them with some dirt or a potsherd, marking the child's stepping into the parental role within the family.

During this period between the time of death and the funeral, preferably only a few hours and longer only when close relatives must come from a distance, the family of the deceased lives in suspended animation, of extreme liminality, making what arrangements they must for the funeral, but released from all responsibilities of daily life. The seven categories of close relatives and official mourners, the spouse, mother, father, son, daughter, sister, or brother are in a category of *aninut*.<sup>10</sup> They are not expected to pray, to work, to study Torah, or to fulfill any positive commandments, except to ensure that the burial will proceed properly. While friends and other relatives may gather around and help with practical decisions, the focus must remain on the deceased. Comforting the mourners is not yet appropriate. If the mourners were present at the time of death, they may already have performed the *mitzvah* of *qeri'ah*, tearing their garments while verbally accepting God's judgment,<sup>11</sup> although today that is usually a private prelude to the funeral itself. This very physical symbol of grief: visibly marks these relatives as mourners, serves as an outlet for their feelings (while avoiding defacing their own bodies, something biblically forbidden), and reinforces to them their own loss.

In antiquity, the funeral procession left immediately from the house of the deceased, accompanied by professional wailers, eulogizers, and flute players, with family members or students of the deceased being the preferred pallbearers. The procession (for a man, at least) paused in a public area and/or in a designated area outside the cemetery for eulogizing the dead. It is not clear to what extent these eulogies drew on a core of stock phrases that were adapted to the status of the deceased. Rabbinic texts preserve only fragments, but suggest that the community gathered to participate in this procession echoed back the eulogy, at least when they agreed with what was said (!). The entire community was expected to join in this procession, for the *mitzvah* of accompanying the dead to the grave supercedes all other *mitzvot*, including Torah study. This is especially true for a *met mitzvah*, a person who has died without family to care for him/her. This *mitzvah* is fulfilled once the grave is closed or filled.

Social change has altered this model somewhat, but its basic components of eulogy and procession remain. In today's world, the community generally gathers in the funeral parlor (or in the case of an important person, in a synagogue) for the funeral service. The casket is present but closed, and the quiet recitation of Psalms continues until shortly before the service begins. Still before the official mourners and other family members join the community, there is often a more public communal recitation of Psalm texts, often of selections from Psalm 119 that spell out the deceased's name. The mourners join the community after performing their *qeri'ah*.<sup>12</sup>

The *mitzvah* of *hesped*, of eulogizing the dead remains the focus of the ritual, although the meaning of "eulogizing" has apparently shifted from stock phrases recited in late antiquity by professional eulogizers<sup>13</sup> to more personal prose expressions. Increasingly in America, family members, business associates, and those who really knew the deceased take upon themselves this *mitzvah*, and the number of eulogies delivered at a funeral has been growing. The purpose of these eulogies is to praise the deceased and remember his or her life. There is no speculation about the afterlife, no direct criticism of the person (eulogies are curtailed where they are not appropriate), and no specific attempt to comfort the mourners (although they are customarily acknowledged).

It has become common to create a liturgical setting for these eulogies by the recitation of Psalms or other similar biblical texts, but this is not necessary, and the number of such texts recited is generally in inverse proportion to the amount of eulogizing.<sup>14</sup> These may be chanted, but no other music is considered appropriate. The funeral concludes with the chanting of a prayer, *'El Mal'ei Rahamim* (God full of compassion),<sup>15</sup> apparently of late-medieval, kabbalistic origin, but today the standard prayer for the dead, recited on all formal occasions of remembrance. The pallbearers then carry the casket to the waiting hearse, followed by the mourners and the community. The hearse often pulls off a little way, partly to allow the procession of cars to form, but also to allow those not going to the cemetery to walk a short distance "accompanying the deceased." The silence of the community, the orderly filing out of the hall as each individual performs this *mitzvah*, is both a mark of respect for the deceased and a sign of the liminality of this time when all have stepped out of the normal paths of their lives. In cases where the community's attendance is drawn by their connection to the deceased and not just a connection to a

mourner, this liminal period is also when they begin the process of recognizing and healing the breach in their communal structure caused by this loss.<sup>16</sup>

The funeral continues at the cemetery itself.<sup>17</sup> Here there are a number of prayers that are more or less standard, but precisely where they are interspersed with the necessary actions of proceeding with the casket to the grave, lowering it into the grave, and filling the grave differs significantly from community to community. None of these prayers are attested to in talmudic literature except for the requirement that the mourners recite the *Tzidduq Hadin*, the (now) lengthy formal acceptance of God's judgment.<sup>18</sup> The other common prayers include a prayer to be recited by anyone who has not been in the cemetery in the past month, the recitation of Psalm 91, at least through verse 12, sometimes accompanying the procession to the grave and marking its halts along the way (as many as seven according to local customs),<sup>19</sup> and then after the filling of the grave, a special burial *kaddish* and, again, 'El Mal'ei Rahamim. The *Tzidduq Hadin* and *kaddish* are public prayers, requiring the presence of a *minyan* of ten adult males.

The *kaddish* in and of itself is a doxological praise of God, developed originally to mark the conclusion of a public study session and then (and still) to punctuate the various phases of the traditional synagogue service. With the development of Jewish memorial rites in the twelfth century (apparently in response to the massacres of the Rhineland Jewish communities by the peasant mobs accompanying the First Crusade but likely with influence from developing Christian memorial rites), this prayer took on a new function as a memorial prayer. It derived this function from a rabbinic tradition that one powerful method to ensure the good fate of a parent's soul after death was for the son to cause the congregation to praise God. In the original rabbinic story, the son seems to have achieved this by simply reciting the *barekhu*, the call to worship. In the high middle ages, mourners took over the task of leading the *kaddish* (recited multiple times at most services) in order to generate the congregation's response, "May His great Name be blessed for ever and ever to all eternity." For most of the past millennium, the recitation of *kaddish* by the mourners at the cemetery marks the beginning of the ritual that will most characterize their period of mourning: the recitation of *kaddish* at every communal prayer service — and the attendant obligation to pray with the community daily. For the children, this (and the annual marking of the anniversary of a parent's death) is the ultimate fulfillment of the commandment to honor one's parent.

As opposed to the "mourner's" or "orphan's" *kaddish* which makes no specific verbal reference to anything relating to death, the "burial *kaddish*" begins:

May His great name be magnified and sanctified in the world that is to be created anew, where He will revive the dead, and raise them up to eternal life; and rebuild the city of Jerusalem; and establish His Temple in its midst; and uproot alien worship from the earth and restore the worship of Heaven to its place. May the Holy One, blessed be He, reign in His sovereignty and glory, during your life and during your days...

This introduction derives from the version of the *kaddish* recited upon the conclusion of the study of a tractate of Talmud, but its introduction into the funeral is not surprising.

Typically, Jewish lifecycle events cast the specific pain (or joy) of the individual into a timeless communal context.<sup>20</sup> This specific praise of God looks to the messianic resurrection of all the dead, including, presumably, the newly deceased, and the restoration of ideal human life on earth.<sup>21</sup>

Again, while in antiquity these funeral rituals were accompanied by professional (female) mourners, professional eulogizers, and flute playing, what characterizes them today is silence, punctuated only by these few relatively brief prayers, recited only by the mourners and the officiant. The community participates in the filling of the grave, each taking a turn after the mourners begin shoveling in the earth. This physical act of farewell marks the final transition of the deceased into the realm of the dead (although some understand the soul to hover for some period afterwards). With the filling of the grave, the community's and mourner's responsibilities to "accompany the dead" are fulfilled. Attention now turns to the mourners.

### Comforting the Mourners

Mourners cannot simply be abandoned in their grief in the cemetery. Rather, the Jewish funeral ritual forces them into a transition out of their status of *'aninut*, where their focus was so entirely on their loss that they were not expected even to pray, into the status of *'avelut*, mourning. As *'avelim* they have time to adjust to their reshaped worlds and gradually return to their social roles. Their community has an obligation to help them through the steps of this task, an obligation only slightly less serious than their participation in the funeral and burial itself.<sup>22</sup>

The first step in this process escorts the mourners out of the cemetery and back to the home of the deceased (or their home). The gathered community lines the path, ideally from the grave to the waiting car (today), and as the mourners pass between these lines, they are greeted by each individual with the formulaic wish, "May God comfort you among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." This line, like the special burial kaddish, has multiple resonances. On the one hand, the mourners who have likely so many times offered these words of comfort to others, upon hearing them directed to themselves, are struck with the reality of their loss. In this sense, it is the performance of the formula and not its content that matters. But the wording of this prayer carries significance too. Its assurance of *future* comfort simultaneously acknowledges and validates the mourner's present personal grief. On the other hand, its communally oriented content (among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem) both indicates that the comforters do indeed know what grief is and points out that the divine promises of the messianic healing of communal grief establish God as a comforter also concerned with healing the immediate personal grief.

When the mourners return home, they are served a ritual meal of consolation (*se'udat havra'ah*). The very act of eating is understood to force the mourners to begin to confront the task of living again. While there is no requirement to fast during *'aninut*, no one eats in the presence of the corpse and many eat sparingly, avoiding meat and wine. This post-burial meal must be provided, at least in part, by the community, institutionalizing the

communal embrace that should surround the mourners during the following week of the *shiv'ah*. This meal is simple, customarily including, beyond the necessary bread to establish the *se'udah* setting, round foods, symbolic of the cycle of life and of the closed-up, numb paralysis of grief. However, the very casting of this meal as a *se'udah*, a ritual meal, places the funeral in continuity with other Jewish life cycle rituals. Just as Catholic life cycle rituals take place in the context of eucharist, Jewish ones take place in the context of ritual (and with the exception of funerals) festive meals.<sup>23</sup> In all these contexts, including the *se'udat havra'ah*, the particular ritual context creates liturgical response in the elaborations on the grace after meals (*birkat hamazon*).<sup>24</sup> While these elaborations bring into the meal and home context the funeral theme of acceptance of God's judgment, they also call on God as comforter. The integration of this mourning into the larger mourning of the nation for Zion and Jerusalem, and the concomitant promise of comfort continues here. These mark this normal meal ritual as extraordinary in a way that is responsive to the reality of the mourner's emotional state.

This meal, while specially marked in the literature, marks the beginning of a week-long period of *'avelut* (the *shiv'ah*), in which every meal contains some of these characteristics. The halakhic requirements placed on the mourners during this week force them into confronting the reality of their loss, both by removing them from their usual responsibilities and creating time for the process of mourning and by requiring certain behaviors that encourage grieving. Mourners are expected to remain in the house, to the point that, in our times, the community ensures that a prayer quorum meets at the *shiv'ah* house twice daily so that the mourners may recite *kaddish*. The mourners may do nothing for themselves; others should serve them their food, answer the telephone, and generally make sure that their needs are met. Members of the community, in addition to embracing the mourners with these acts of caring, sit with the mourners, respecting their need for silence, but when the mourners speak, encouraging them to speak about the deceased. Specific prohibitions physically reinforce this changed pattern of life: sitting only on low stools or on the floor; wearing no (leather) shoes; wearing the same torn clothing; not washing; not shaving or cutting hair; and eschewing sexual relations.<sup>25</sup> Mourners are not expected to function socially; they may not greet others, and others take their leave not with the everyday farewells, but with recitation of the formula first heard at the funeral, "May God grant you comfort among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." Rubin points out that symbols of the destruction of their social network surround the mourner, but he emphasizes that these are simultaneously counterbalanced by acts of social reintegration, as the mourner hears the community's words of comfort and continuing eulogies of the deceased and eats the community's food.<sup>26</sup> Public elements of mourning are lifted for the Sabbath; the mourners attend the synagogue, wear untorn clothes and leather shoes, and sit on regular chairs.

Most elements of this liminal status and all elements of the formal, commanded comforting of mourners end after morning prayers on the seventh day. The mourners mark this change by leaving the house and taking a short walk around the block. After this, they return to their normal activities — for the most part. All mourners continue to recite the *kaddish* at every service for the entire first thirty days following the burial and to continue to observe the prohibitions on shaving and haircuts. Mourners for a parent

maintain their status for twelve months, avoiding entertainment, not buying new clothing, and reciting *kaddish* for all but the last month.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the mourners, having focused on their loss for a week, gradually return to normal activity.

## Conclusion

No attempt has been made in this survey to address a number of admittedly important questions. The funeral ritual described here applies only to Jews of Ashkenazi (i.e., central and eastern European) descent who have maintained ties to traditional practice but who live in modernity — the community in which I personally live. There are significant variations on many of these themes within traditional communities stemming from other parts of the Jewish world, less on matters that are halakhically mandated, than in understandings of the meanings of death and liturgical elaborations on the basic core. Dozens of questions remain unanswered about the origins and history of much of this ritual. No one has investigated the development of the individual prayer texts or situated them against the intellect worlds in which they developed. On the other hand, liberal communities today have assimilated to greater and lesser degrees into the funerary norms of their greater societies. In these communities, ornate coffins, embalming (and sometimes cremation), even viewing the body occur and *shiv'ah* has shrunk sometimes to a gathering after the funeral. There is some evidence of a return in some quarters to a more traditional ritual, but the dozens of modern, mostly liberal, funeral and memorial liturgies deserve detailed study.

However, for most of the past two millennia and maybe even before, Jewish funerals have conformed more or less to the patterns described here. Burial, ideally simple and immediate, precedes a formal period of mourning. Funeral liturgy itself remained relatively flexible, allowing a focus on the person of the deceased. Participation in the preparations for burial, the burial itself, and in comforting the mourners are considered acts of *gemilut hasadim*, expressions of lovingkindness in *imitatio dei* that take precedence over all other commanded activities and which have no measure, either for their performance or their heavenly reward.

## Notes:

1. Nissan Rubin, *Qetz Hahayyim (The End of Life: Rites of Burial and Mourning in the Talmud and Midrash)*, (Hakkibutz Hameuchad, 1997); and David Kraemer, *The Meanings of Death in Rabbinic Judaism* (Routledge, 2000). Rubin is an anthropologist asking interesting questions of the rabbinic texts and archaeological evidence but without the necessary tools to read these texts historically and critically and with a tendency to jump between contemporary practice and that of late antiquity. Kraemer reads rabbinic texts as literature, rather than from a historical or ritual perspective. His separation of the evidence by texts rather than of historical layers within the texts (particularly problematic when he confronts the complexities of the Babylonian Talmud) presents a picture even

more muddled than necessary; his understandings of archaeological evidence and ritual processes are similarly challenged.

2. Sylvie-Anne Goldberg, *Crossing the Jabbok: Illness and Death in Ashkenazi Judaism in Sixteenth- through Nineteenth-Century Prague*, trans. Carol Cosman (University of California Press, 1996). Her understanding of the larger historical, religious, and theological context in which the materials she studies develop is also challenged, limiting the depth and accuracy of her analyses.

3. Leon Wieselthier, *Kaddish* (Knopf, 1998) addresses aspects of this question, but does not present the results of his research in a scholarly fashion. The book is a diary of his processes of learning and mourning, lacking footnotes and critical contextualization of his sources.

4. One could reasonably argue that this transition begins when it is recognized that the person is dying, in the halakhic category of being a *goses*. In this period, there are specific directives for the behavior of the family and community of the dying person, including recitation of Psalms and formal confession of sins (*vidui*). However, in all ways, the *goses* is a living person and not in a liminal state between life and death. This has implications for the Jewish arguments against euthanasia or organ harvest before physiological death. It also means that making funeral arrangements or beginning to mourn one's loss before death has occurred is considered halakhically inappropriate.

5. Although we can trace radical changes in the Jewish views of immortality of the soul and life after death, Rubin, 35, finds no correlation between changing understandings and changing rituals of burial. A consideration of early modern kabbalistic modifications to the burial service would alter his conclusions somewhat, as prayers like the '*El Mal'ei Rahamim*, discussed below, introduce propositions about the fate of the soul.

6. For a brief history of this institution, see L.I. Rabbinowitz, "Hevra Kaddisha, " *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. For an extensive study of the first *hevra kaddisha* to function solely as a burial society, see Goldberg.

7. By the early modern period, likely under the influence of kabbalah, we find burial manuals specifying the recitation of verses appropriate to each body part that should accompany the washing. I do not recall our reciting these in the few times that I have served on the *hevra kaddisha*. Only some modern descriptions of this process mention these verses.

8. Note the rabbinically mandated simplicity of the shrouds and coffin. In death, there are neither rich nor poor, as no worldly goods can accompany one beyond the grave. Burial is ideally in the earth to enable the body to decompose as quickly as possible. Hence, some communities are not accustomed to use any coffin. Others use only a plain pine box with no nails. Embalming to preserve the body is forbidden. Because showing respect for the dead involves keeping the body covered at all times, there is no need to beautify it. Similarly, cremation which speeds the destruction of the body is forbidden. Some

understand this as problematic because it destroys the bones as well as the flesh, and even in antiquity when the bones were reburied, they were maintained intact for the time of resurrection. Others today associate cremation with Hitler's ultimate sign of disrespect for the Jewish dead.

9. I have not been able to locate serious research on the development of this ritual. The talmudic custom consisted simply of cleansing and anointing the corpse; by the sixteenth century it involved a complex liturgy with clear kabbalistic overtones, including asking forgiveness for the sins of the deceased. Today's discussions evidence great diversity of actual practice. Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, (New York, 1969), 247, indicates only a prayer asking forgiveness of the deceased as the coffin is closed. He apparently refers to the following, found in the *Ma'avar Yaboq*, a common book of prayers for the dying and deceased, which reads:

Master of the universe, have mercy on \_\_\_\_\_ this deceased person who was a child of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob Your servants. And may his soul and spirit rest with the righteous, for you give life to the dead and bring death to the living. Blessed are you who forgives the sins and transgressions of your people Israel through [their] supplications.

Therefore, may it be Your will, Eternal our God and God of our ancestors that the angels of mercy circle before the deceased, for he is/was your servant, son of your maidservant. And You, Eternal our God and God of our ancestors, who considers the poor, cause him to flee from every trouble and from an evil day and from the judgment of Gehinnom. Blessed are You, great in lovingkindness and master of mercies.

Blessed are You who makes peace in His heavens for his servants and for those who revere His name.

Blessed is the One who mercifully redeems His people Israel from all sorts of trials.

Therefore, may it be Your will, Eternal our God and God of our ancestors that you remember the merit of his holy circumcision and may it be redemptive for him from the fires of Gehinnom and may it deliver him. Blessed are You who mercifully makes the covenant.

Make vanish the sins of this deceased person, Your servant, deliver him from the burning fire, for he is in great need of Your mercy, Eternal One. And you, Eternal our God are good and forgiving to all who call on you. Blessed are You, mercifully of great wisdom and of mighty deeds.

May he step with the feet of the righteous in the Garden of Eden, for that is the place of the upright, where God will guard the feet of his pious ones. Blessed are You, who gives great mercies and multitudinous compassion to the deceased of His people Israel. Amen. May it be Your will. (Aharon Berakhia ben Moshe of Modena, *Sefer edah Laderekh ha'Emet vehu' Ma'avar Yaboq*, ed. Yehuda Leib Gordon (New York, 1939), 50-1.)

A slightly shorter version of this prayer, with translation, appears in Abner Weiss, *Death and Bereavement: A Halakhic Guide* (Ktav, 1991), 210-1.

However, Hyman E. Goldin, *Hamadrikh: The Rabbi's Guide, A Manual of Jewish Religious Rituals, Ceremonials, and Customs* (revised edition, n.p., n.d.), 120, indicates only that those performing the *tahara* recite a brief prayer asking for strength to perform their task properly before beginning, then Ezek. 36:25, "And I will pour upon you pure water, and you shall be cleansed; from all your uncleanness and abominations will I purify you," while pouring water over the body. A slightly more elaborate version of this appears in the *Sefer haHayyim*, ed. S.E. Bloch (Hannover, 1875; fifth edition with German translation), 65-6, with the note that this is the custom of "some" [Hebrew] or "many" [German] communities. These texts represent a different (possibly regional) tradition that apparently does not know or accept the prayer translated above.

10. From the fairly rare biblical word for mourning, *'wn* (אין); the rabbis distinguished between this kind of mourning and that following the funeral, for which they employed the more common root, *'bl* (אבל).

11. "Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Sovereign of the universe, the true Judge." The Mishnah, Berakhot 9:2,5 teaches that one must praise God for the bad as well as for the good things in life. This is the *berakhah* it requires upon hearing any sort of bad tidings. Those not among the formal category of mourners, upon hearing news of a death, recite a shortened text that omits the formal elements that qualify it as a *berakhah*, "Blessed is the true Judge." On the reasons for this, see my *To Worship God Properly: Tensions between Liturgical Custom and Halakhah in Judaism* (Hebrew Union College Press, 1998), 24-6, 41-51.

12. In my hometown, in Pittsburgh, it is customary at least among Reform Jews for the family to receive condolences for an hour before the actual funeral. I have never personally seen this in an orthodox context where the focus at the point is strictly on the deceased, although I have read criticisms of it, indicating that it does occur. This Jewish version of a visitation at the funeral parlor is an assimilation of an American custom that directly contradicts Jewish teachings. Kraemer, 12, suggests that this is part of our culture's general divorce from hands on experience of death so that the focus on preparing for the funeral is less total; and/or a changed understanding of the ongoing humanity of the corpse. If the body neither hears nor feels, the consequences of ignoring it are much less.

13. Although one might wonder whether this does indeed still happen in cases where the family "finds" a rabbi to conduct the funeral who knows neither the family nor the deceased.

14. In a non-liturgical tradition, this would not be a significant observation, but (traditional) Judaism is extremely liturgical. The lack of specific *halakhah* scripting the funeral is exceptional on all counts.

15. There is no requirement of a *minyan* (quorum) for this prayer's recitation, and there is fairly significant (for traditional Jewish liturgy, at least) variation in its precise text. It contains no *berakhah* formula or other language that would restrict its recitation to specific settings. To my knowledge, no one has yet seriously studied its history. A basic version of the text translates as follows:

God full of compassion who dwells in the high heavens, grant perfect rest beneath the wings of Your Indwelling Presence (*Shekhinah*), in the exalted places among the holy and the pure, to the soul of \_\_\_\_\_ who has entered eternity. May his/her resting place be in the Garden of Eden. Please, Master of Compassion, shelter him/her under the cover of Your wings forever; and may his/her soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life. The Eternal is his/her portion; may he/she rest in peace. And let us say "amen."

Note the very physical perception of the ideal resting place of the soul which is typical of liturgies from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Other keys to the kabbalistic origins of this prayer are the invocation of God's *Shekhinah* and the discussion only of the *neshamah*, one of three biblical words for "soul" and the aspect of the person that kabbalists understood to go directly to God upon death. (See, for example, David S. Ariel, *The Mystic Quest: An Introduction to Jewish Mysticism* (Schocken, 1988), Ch. 8, "The Oneness of Being: The Destiny of the Soul," 123-38.) Modern discomfort with some elements of the theology of the afterlife expressed in this prayer has resulted in interpretative translations but not in substantive changes to the Hebrew text itself.

16. As Rubin, 27-9, 43, 50, discusses, the death of someone whose life intersected with one's own represents a breach in one's communal network. Death rituals function to heal that network and reshape it. However, this is not always the case for those attending the funeral in our world. At my stage in life, more, although not all, funerals are for parents of friends, usually parents who I did not know or knew only peripherally. Rubin's discussion of how the nature of social networks shapes death practices is in and of itself of significance. He suggests that modern America represents a much looser network than that presupposed by Jewish traditional customs. In this case, most of the community is not personally affected by the loss; it also consequently provides much less support to those directly affected. The modern orthodox community in which I live preserves many elements of a tighter network, but it is only rarely a network encompassing local multigenerational families.

17. Jewish cemeteries are always outside of town (although today's urban sprawl can surround an existing cemetery). Much of this derives from a sense that dead bodies are a source of ritual impurity. *Kohanim*, members of priestly families, may come in contact with the dead only for their own seven categories of relatives, and hence may not enter cemeteries or funeral homes. Even non-priests, on leaving a cemetery or funeral home, ritually wash their hands to remove this impurity (but also to make a separation in tasks and realms) before entering another building.

18. While the prayer text itself does not appear in these sources, the concept that God reacts positively to and even expects a formal acceptance of any divine judgment,

especially a bad one like death, is prominent. *Sifre Deuteronomy 307* (parallel: *B. Avodah Zarah 18a*) records that when Rabbi Hanina ben Teradion was notified that he was to be martyred by the Romans, he responded with Deuteronomy 32:4, "The Rock, His work is perfect, for all His ways are judgment: a God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and right is He." This verse begins today's prayer. The midrash records that his wife and daughter also responded to the news with biblical verses justifying God's decree, and it praises this family for its appropriate act of *Tzidduq hadin*. *B. Berakhot 19a* discusses and criticizes some exemplars of texts for this ritual. None of the texts mentioned there appear in today's prayer, for they "give an opening to Satan" by suggesting human sinfulness as the cause of divine judgment. *Sifra Shemini Parashah 1* records the models of the patriarchs and kings in accepting God's judgment in the face of death. None of their texts, where recorded, became normative either. Geonic (post-talmudic early medieval) texts indicate that the prayer has taken its current form as a florilegium of biblical verses. (See the source translated by Kraemer, 136, from B.M. Lewin, *Oar Hageonim, Mashqin*, p. 41.) This is a typical literary form for liturgies of this period as I have demonstrated elsewhere. However, it is typical of Jewish liturgy of this period to assume that people could compose appropriate texts on their own as needed. A detailed study of the evolution of today's tightly defined text is needed.

19. These halts seem to be the remnant of the tannaitic custom of "standing and sitting" on the way to — or perhaps back from — the cemetery. This is only one example of an early funerary custom, named but not described in detail in the Mishnah, that the Amoraic rabbis, particularly of the Babylonian Talmud, and their heirs did not really understand. (See Kraemer, 134-5.) These named customs are often assigned new content based on these later understandings. Other examples are the *hesped* (eulogy) and the *birkat 'avelim* (blessing of the mourners).

20. Compare the seven wedding benedictions and their locating this marriage between that of Adam and Eve and the messianic rejoicing in Jerusalem. As we shall see below, there are significant continuities between wedding and mourning rituals in Judaism.

21. On this kaddish, see Kraemer, 137, and his notes to this page. There is no adequate study of this text's history.

22. We can determine the relative weight of these obligations from the rabbinic discussions about whether one must cease studying Torah to participate in them; and whether the person participating in the ritual who has a competing ritual obligation (like the recitation of *shema* ' before the appropriate hour for its recitation has passed) gives priority to the funerary ritual. Many of these discussions appear in Mishnah *Berakhot* Ch. 3 and the talmudic discussions and supercommentaries on it.

23. Ritual meals are a necessary part of the observance of calendrical rituals too, except for on fast days. However, in these cases, there is also a substantial synagogue-based liturgy dedicated to the purpose of the day. If a circumcision or a wedding takes place in conjunction with a synagogue service, these are almost totally conceived as discrete events that happen to coincide; the synagogue liturgy reacts only in minor ways to the

added event. Bar mitzvah is the obvious exception here — but the celebration of bar mitzvah is entirely an elaboration on the experience of the boy's first eligibility to take on adult ritual roles. What a bar mitzvah does in the synagogue is not structurally different from what would have occurred there on any other week.

24. This special text is recited during every meal at which bread is eaten during the entire *shiv'ah*. It has direct parallels in some traditions to the recitation of the wedding elaboration of seven blessings (*sheva' berakhot*) during the week after a wedding, in both cases only when there are *panim hadashot* (new faces — among the comforters or guests). The invitation to this grace at the *shiv'ah* calls for the praise of God as "Comforter of Mourners" as opposed to the regular "our God." The conclusion of the third blessing, calling for the rebuilding of Jerusalem, is rephrased:

Comfort, Eternal our God, the mourners of Jerusalem and the mourners who are suffering from this present grief. Comfort them from their grief and cheer them from their sadness. As it is said, "Like a person whose mother comforts him, so I will comfort you and in Jerusalem you will be comforted." Blessed are You who comforts Zion with the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

In the fourth blessing, there is normally a simple recognition of God's goodness that employs language derived from the blessing recited upon hearing good tidings. Here, where there have been bad tidings, this text transforms into a *idduq hadin*:

...who is kind and deals kindly with all. True God, true Magistrate, righteous Judge, and Taker of souls in justice; and Sovereign in His world to do with it according to His will, for all His ways are justice. And we are His people and his servants, obligated to give thanks and to bless Him for everything. May the One who repairs breaches in Israel repair this breach, granting us life and peace. May he bestow upon us forever grace and lovingkindness, mercy and all that is good, and let us lack nothing good.

Again, further research needs to clarify the origins of this precise text and its possible connections to the tannaitic *birkat 'avelim* (blessing of the mourners. The Babylonian Talmud already invests this term with new meaning, as do, again, later medieval traditions. See Kraemer, 126-132 and the sources he cites). Our contemporary first blessing clearly elaborates on the standard greeting to mourners, the second elaborates on messianic themes of comfort, and the third expresses themes both of *Tzidduq hadin*, justification of the judgment, and of prayers for comfort. We have seen these themes already.

25. Of this entire list, not washing and wearing the same clothes have the most dramatically different impact today. When the halakhah originated, washing and clean clothes were luxuries for most people, indulged in infrequently. Many of today's rabbis soften the impact of these prohibitions by allowing bathing for hygienic reasons and changing of undergarments or badly soiled outer clothing. Similarly, the person physically unable to sit on a low stool or on the floor may find another, but ideally still

unusual, way to sit. Hence, as Rubin, 162, suggests, these are not meant as afflictions to the body of the mourner, but as markers of the mourner's liminal status.

26. 161-2.

27. The shorter mourning period for a spouse seems strange to us today when the loss of a spouse is, for most, emotionally and functionally the most difficult bereavement. There are many reasons behind this. For much of Jewish history, marriage was not based on ideas of love but was rather more of an economic and procreative arrangement within a society in which men and women functioned in separate realms. Practically speaking, a shorter mourning period also enabled faster remarriage in a world where single-parenting was not economically viable. Men may remarry after a month; women after three months as long as they are not pregnant (and the three months is necessary to establish this and clarify paternity). Finally, mourning for parents is understood to be governed by the additional command to honor one's parents. Ritual actions that help ensure a good afterlife, preserving the memory of parents, are tasks that belong in the hands of a younger generation. In addition, some suggest that it is precisely because children might not naturally feel the need to mourn their parents that the tradition requires it — and because one might never be able to let go of mourning for a spouse or a child that the tradition encourages one to move on after thirty days.