



## Review Article

### Jewish Mourning Rituals: Understanding in Treatment

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#### Abstract

In the culture of Jewish religion, rituals surrounding the death of a loved one follow a timeline to guide the mourners to honor the dead with a focus on others to comfort the mourner. Freud described the process of mourning to change through bereavement that requires physical and emotional energy. Mourning does not happen all at once, but over time. This is apparent in the traditions of the Jewish religion as their mourning period lasts a year. There are stages and rituals in the Jewish traditions that have steps of moving through bereavement, but this does not mean that there are not degrees of mourning based on the relationship to the deceased. Although traditions in the various Jewish faiths may vary, the focus is on the spiritual journey. With the current times and restrictions on the number of people that can gather during this global pandemic, rituals may not look like traditional gatherings. As social workers, walking with clients on the journey of healing, we not only need to understand the importance of ritual and the significance of religion but in the current climate. We have a unique opportunity to work with clients that may need to adjust customs. Recognizing the importance can help us guide them to work within limitations but still work through rituals to healing.

#### Understanding Jewish Mourning

Judaism has several labels and therefore can have varying views, especially about death, the dying process, and the afterlife [1-3]. As a professional social worker, it is important to understand the importance of faith and rituals to assist clients through bereavement processes. Without understanding someone's ideas and background, the clinical work may interfere with the client's healing process. The social worker must listen to understand the spiritual needs and importance to the client [3]. Performing some sort of ritual, religious

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or otherwise, can give mourners a sense of control and purpose during the stages of bereavement [4].

Understanding the general Jewish traditions surrounding death is important knowledge to have when working with someone who is experiencing death. In Jewish traditions, cremation is not accepted, as natural decomposition is required [3]. There is traditionally no open casket because there can be no public viewing of the body or cosmetics used [3]. Those of the Jewish faith are permitted to donate organs but autopsies are typically not permitted [5]. They are buried in ordinary clothing with men typically wearing a traditional shawl and yarkelka (head covering) [3].

#### Jewish Stages of Mourning Defined

The period immediately following the actual death is called "Aninut" and the goal is to proceed with the funeral and to ensure that it is planned quickly and completed respectfully [6]. This time would also begin the mourning process. The "Aninut" phase completes at the start of the funeral [6].

The next period is referred to as "Shiva" and includes the funeral and week following [6]. This phase is for close relatives of the dead [7]. During the funeral, prayers are read – sometimes in both Hebrew and English [3]. Anyone is invited to attend the ceremony (usually in the home) and attendees will sometimes wear a black ribbon or a torn garment to indicate their sorrow [3]. After the ceremony, the deceased individual is taken to the cemetery and the traditions continue to witness the burial [3]. Following this, the mourners typically light a candle to initiate a seven-day mourning period where people generally do not attend work or typical routines [3]. It is important during this time that support to the mourners is apparent, as consoling them is highly valued [6].

The 30 days ("Shloshim") and year ("Shanah") following the death are a time to prepare the mourner(s) for firsts that will occur in absence of the deceased [6]. In the thirty days following the death, the mourners will return to a more normal routine but do not normally attend celebrations [3]. Up to a year following the death, the tombstone is revealed in a small ceremony [3]. At the anniversary of the death, a small ceremony concludes at sunset the mourning period officially ends as it is the 12-month anniversary of the death [3]. Some American-Jewish communities now participate in a "fast grief" to hasten the grieving process to return to life at a more normal pace [5].

#### Additional Cultural Importance

Some Jewish customs include women wailing. This is seen as a way to be in touch with their emotions [7]. It can be seen as "an instrument designed to actualize their emotions" during the mourning process [7]. During wailing, the mourner may describe the deceased (manner of death, stories, traits), may speak to the deceased (a dialogue), a narrative on behalf of the mourners, appeals the deceased to explain the mourners are missing them, address the consolers, address the mourners, add a personal story, addressing other wailers, addressing death, or address God [8]. This part of the religious ritual

could be part of the emotional processing that occurs to “successfully absorb emotional disturbances” that are part of complicated grieving if emotions are not addressed [9].

The afterlife is viewed differently but all accept that death is real and memories live on and most believe in the immortality of the soul [3]. An overall picture of death and mourning is based on two principles, honoring the dead (“kavod hamet”) and obligations to comfort the mourners (“nichum avelim”) [5]. The continuation of life in some form is understood in all classical teachings as it is believed that they will live on in some form [5]. There is an understanding of the afterlife, which gives a sense of peace and God’s control [6].

## Ritual for Healing

Rituals are a way for loved ones to keep in touch with the memory of their loved one [10]. Anniversaries, celebrations, and memorials differ from culture to culture but demonstrate an interaction with the memories of those that are deceased. Rituals of continuity are symbolic expressions that take place periodically and can be linked to cultural norms [10]. Rituals of transition are those that are one-time and mark changes within the subsystem surrounding an event [10].

Rituals have healing properties that assist to promote a journey of healthy healing [10]. Rituals are purposeful and a way to express internal feelings and emotions to promote the healing process [10]. The act of the ritual physically can decrease strong emotional status while decreasing tension that has built up [10]. The ritual of wailing in Jewish culture mirrors this idea.

Specifically, in the Jewish cultures, there are identified times for ceremonies surrounding the death of a loved one. For some, this is helpful because the structure of the endpoints helps them deal with the fear, they will be consumed with emotions [10]. Rituals can additionally help develop a connection with the deceased through legitimate emotional changes [10]. The rituals for mourning assist in the confrontation of the reality of the death and beginning to work through the processes in healing [10]. Rituals provide structure during the loss at a time where the mourner may be feeling very disorganized and confused [10]. In Jewish rituals, the stages they participate in can assist in accomplishing this. Rituals can assist to reduce stress and facilitate social interaction is critical in successful mourning [10]. This is where the ceremonies surrounding the death are so important to Jewish culture.

## Creating New Rituals

### Steps of creating a ritual

Creating a ritual is completed in steps as it must be meaningful and therapeutic [10]. They must be personalized to the mourner and must pertain to the specific loss [10]. The steps include: assessing all aspect of the mourner and the loss, determining the focus and purpose, specifying the message that should be conveyed, choosing the type of ritual, choosing the elements of the ritual, creating the context of the ritual, preparing the mourning for the ritual, implementation of the ritual, processing the experience of the ritual, and reevaluating and deciding if the ritual was effective [10].

### Why we need to create a new ritual

In the current climate of a global pandemic, rituals of continuity

and rituals of transition across so many cultures have been forced us all to alter what we are used to. People are avoiding all contact with one another, attempting to keep their distance when waiting in line or even having a conversation, and gatherings have a limited number of people that are permitted to be in attendance. After a loved one dies, so often family and friends gather for some sort of ceremony to celebrate life and honor the person who passed. We are all now forced to change traditions while still looking to show respect to the deceased.

Although social distancing precautions are changing (what seems like daily), the number of people that are permitted to gather has been limited to a very small number (10 or 25 in some cases). After a loved one dies, families are now faced with the planning of a funeral but only choosing a small number of people that would be authorized to attend. For those of the Jewish religion, this is an adjustment to the imprinted expectations of the religious services they adhere to. The “Aninut” stage being immediately following the death and would be limited in number for social distancing purposes. Because traditionally, the focus is on catering to the close family members and caring for them in their time of mourning. This would now be limited to very few friends or extended family to participate in caring for the immediate mourners. Because the service is typically held in the home, only a few would be able to attend beginning the “Shiva” stage. After the ceremony in the home, the same small group of family members would follow the deceased to the burial site and witness them being laid to rest. “Shloshim” and “Shanah” would most likely be without a change in tradition.

### The plan for adjustment

To continue to meet the needs of the mourner, as the social worker focusing on bereavement, I would contact a local Rabbi for guidance on changing the structure of the ritual but still adhering to the sanctity of the religious ceremony. Religion and faith can be an important part of the healing process and involving one’s faith community provide a sense of comfort and support [11]. Identifying the best approach is important to finding a path to healing and maintaining the respect of religious traditions but also being mindful of the need for social distancing and a spreading virus could be a challenge.

I would recommend utilizing the “Shanah” (one year after the death) to create a symbol for the deceased to honor them within a traditional religious practice. This could include planting a tree in their honor as symbols assist the mourners to express how they are feeling based on the loss [10]. The tree could be picked by the family and type could be something of meaning to the deceased. The hope would be that the global pandemic has subsided and all family and friends can attend to honor the deceased. In assessing, this keeps within the practices of the individual and is relevant to life as a tree growing forms new life and the ceremony keeps in line with the rituals of the culture. This new ritual focuses on the deceased and has a purpose in keeping with religious tradition but also allows extended family, friends, and community members to be involved. Conveying the message at the ceremony utilized the symbol of the tree to end “Shanah”. In choosing this particular ritual, it keeps with tradition, ensures continuity in a transition period. The elements of the ritual identify that everyone who chooses to be involved can be (whereas because of a pandemic, many could not attend the immediate ceremonies), utilizes symbols

that act to create a new life in celebration with a former life (keeping in line with “kavod hamet” and “nichum avelim”) while employing characteristics of personal meaning to the mourners. I would assist the mourner to create the context around the ceremony to choose who should participate to create the most meaning for those in attendance. I would work to prepare the mourner for the ritual to create appropriate timing, identify their motivations, and ensuring to build in religious importance. I would then help them to implement the ritual so they are fully emotionally and spiritually present at the event. After the ritual, I would work to process the ritual to discuss the impact it had on them and identify any unfinished business they may have acknowledged. Finally, I would work with them to reevaluate and redecide if the planned ritual was effective and met their expectations or needs.

## Conclusion

A tie to the periodic changes following the death of an individual is not only evident in the Jewish faith, but also through the mourning phases. With time attached to the religious rituals, it helps with the mourning process to identify the needs of the mourner and support the ongoing relationship with the deceased under a new finality of their departure from this life [6]. Adaptations have to be made at times and new rituals are formed. This is currently evident in the structure of our world facing Coronavirus. Rituals are a tool for mourning and are important to identify and maintain what we can promote healthy healing through the mourning process.

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