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# ATTITUDES TOWARD DEATH IN JUDAISM – THE MOURNING RITES

There is something comforting in the proverb „one who was not born will not die". Death is an inevitable part of life, its absolute opposite, which has always been recognized by the human mind and denied by the human heart. The man's refusal to consciously accept the fact about his „return" to the state of nothingness presents a normal reaction caused by the irreconcilable conflict between the instinct for life and the passage of life towards its end. In a natural attempt to survive the collision between Eros and Thanatos, in which the second one wins, human beings have treated death both as an idea and as a phenomenon within different religious systems (ranging from ancient pagan religions to the more developed institutionalized religious systems) at every level of human social development. The common solution to the mystery of death has been found in the notion of „life after death". The interpretations of this common solution, however, varied across cultures and societies. On the other hand, the religious concept of cause-and-effect relationship between the way of living in this world and the quality of the one to come, has been given practically equal treatment accross religious systems and it has played a singificant role in regulating social relationships and maintaining moral values. That said, one should keep in mind that the notion of the morally acceptable behavior toward oneself and the fellow human beings has been a relative one, and it has varied according to the prevailing conceptions and norms of the cultural systems in different human communities. At any rate, most religious studies have been initiated in an attempt to protect the society and its values. Consequently, the religion has had a highly beneficial role, especially at the lower stages of cultural development when it represented one of the main institutions of the social establishment. However, while some religions have kept this positive course, others suffered a serious misuse of the „positive principles" through history,

which has darkened the basic purpose of the religion as an integral part of the human spiritual culture.

Comprehension of life and death in Judaism is manifested through a number of religious and ritual procedures. A complex set of mourning rites present in the Jewish culture is entirely regulated by religious rules, and partially intertwined with the modes of behavior and beliefs transferred from pagan societies which lived at a lower level of social organization. In earlier historical and cultural phases of social and economic development, death of one member of the community affected the community as a whole. The behavior and the way emotions were to be expressed by the closest relatives and by the broader community where prescribed by the *Torah.* The broader community extended its help to the ones in mourning so that they could face their grief, express it, and, ultimately, try and find spiritual peace before the inevitable fact that the person they loved died. In the *Torah* , different aspects of mourning were discussed: mourning of children for their parents, of parents for their children, mourning of other members of the family or the community, etc. These rules were worked out in time in order to ensure better care and tender comfort, first for the dying, and then for the ones in mourning.'

A sick person needed the support and care which was provided through the visits from the members of the community. To visit a sick person – *bikur holim* (Hebr.) was a social event with religious connotations. *Bikur holim* was a good deed, religious and moral duty of every Jew to his relatives and friends as well as to his neighbors, regardless of their religion, race or social status. The custom to visit a sick person implied not only a formal act of good will, but also a specific spiritual and material aid. The visitor was supposed to comfort and encourage a wealthy patient and to provide a poor one with the basic necessities. Visits had a very practical purpose which is also reflected in the series of rather strict instructions provided by the rabbi, related to their frequency and duration. In cases of long and difficult illnesses, visits were forbidden for the first three days which were considered the most critical. When the initial period passed, only the members of the patient's family were allowed to take care of the him. In the days to come, other members of the community were allowed to visit the patient, except during the first and the last three hours of a day when the doctor's visits were expected. All rabbi's instructions about visiting the patient were formulated with consideration of the patient's well-being. Caution was very important in cases of serious illnesses. Judaism considers the human life sacred, and to help a man in need was justified in any context, even if it meant the violation of the code of behavior prescribed for the observance of the *Sabbath.* The

doctor – *Rofe* (Hebr.) had to stay by his patient's side even if the most likely outcome was fatal. The doctor was obliged to care for the dying person until the last moment and treat him as if there were hope for his recovery. From the psychological point of view, this was very beneficial. Euthanasia was forbidden, and it was treated as murder by the Jewish religious laws. This attitude was then transferred to the civil law.

The ritual called *Shinuj' ashem* (Hebr.), which involved changing the patient's name or adding another name to the one he had, was used in order to protect the patient from the encounter with death. Choosing another name had a very clear symbolic meaning as can be seen from the following examples: *Hayim* – life; *Yachiel* – God revives; *Rafael* – God cures, etc. All the names chosen by the sick had the purpose to protect or „desguise" them, so that they would be out of death's reach. The magical power of names is also known in other cultures[2]. For example, Eastern and Western Slavic cultures use the name Lyon (Lav), while in the Serbian culture the name Wolf (Vuk) is given to children to protect them and make them stronger. These names originate from prechristian times, and they were common in families with high infant mortality rates. Similarly, the connection between a man and his name is described in the *Talmud,* according to which charity, prayer and the change of name, along with the alternations in behavior can bring someone's life to a better course.

A dying man was called *Goses* (Hebr.) and on no account could he be left alone. Sitting by the dying person was called the *Mitzvah* (God-pleasing, noble deed, Hebr.) and its purpose was to give the dying person the comfort and protection when the death came. Namely, according to the belief which was particularly common during the Middle Ages, angels and demons waged a fierce battle over the soul of the dying man. However, Jews believed that only the presence of the living could defend a dying person from demons and thus prevent them from approaching him. When death was confirmed, a member of the family, preferably a son, would close the eyes and the mouth of the deceased, and he would tie up the lower jaw before the body became stiff. The body was then placed on the floor, covered with a blanket, and the candle was lit close to the deceased person's head. The ritual of lighting the candles is also part of the Christian religion; this ritual is based on the belief that the dead person's soul needs the candlelight to illuminate his voyage to Heaven. This explanation does not stand in contradiction with the older, pagan motive of expelling demons by flames and candlelight. The custom of placing the deceased's body on the floor also presents a combination of practical and religious reasons. The practical and the primary reason for such a procedure was related to the warm climate, while the religious symbol origi-

nated from the *Bible* postulation that a man was created from „dust", i.e., soil, and that to dust he would return. The *goses* was not to be left alone, and his body was to be watched day and night until the funeral, during holidays, and even on Saturdays. The purpose of this custom, *kevod' amet* (Hebr.), was to pay respect to the dead, since according to the Jewish tradition, human beings are considered as sacred as the 7bra/zascrolls. Consequently, every deceased is entitled to a ceremony called the *awn hakođesh* which is an expression of respect and devotion for the dead. The mourner who sat wake by the deceased's side was called the *Shomerim* (guard, Hebr. pi.) and he was relieved of all other religious duties during the wake period.

The so called „Holy Association" – *Hevra Qaddisha* (Hebr.) was in charge of bathing and dressing the deceased, as well as of the burial procedure. Similar organizations are mentioned in the *Talmud* as well, but official establishment of this holy association does not reach far back into the past. The „Holy Association" was first mentioned in Prague, in the second half of the 16th century, after which it became a part of the Jewish religious and common law at the local community level. In the past, the „Holy Associations" functioned as volunteer organizations, but in more recent times in larger Jewish communities they began to employ full-time clerks. Aside from performing the tasks related to the deceased, the *Hevra Qaddisha* visited patients, comforted them, provided medical help and medicines to the poor ones, and made the first meal for the family after the funeral. All these jobs were considered the *Mitzvah*, important and humane religious duties which were often exercised by highly respected persons from the community. A particularly great *Mitzvah* included taking care of the funeral arrangements for the deceased who had no family. Such a deceased was marked by the term *Meth Mitzvah*, and the jobs related to his funeral *Mitzvah Gedolah.*

Bathing the body – *taara* or *rehitsa* (cleaning, bathing, Hebr.) – was a ritual act based on the Biblical concept that a man should be sent off to his last voyage in the same way he had been received. If newly born children needed to be bathed, the dead needed the same. The body was bathed by the so called *rohatsim* (Hebr. pi.), who was a member of the local *Hevra Qaddisha.* The ritual was performed in a separate house or in a special room dedicated to this purpose at the cemetery chapel. During the ritual, the candle was kept lit all the time and the body was treated with great respect. The deceased was laid on a stone table which was previously covered with a special cloth. The bathing ceremony consisted of pouring warm water over each part of the deceased's body starting from his head. His hair was also washed and combed, and his nails manicured. The cloth was used to dry off the body, which had to be done without any direct contact with it.

The body of the deceased was dressed in *tahirim* – clothes made of white linen. The *tahirim* consisted of at most seven and at least three parts which were sewed without borders, knots and pockets. These clothes were more elaborate at earlier times in Jewish history, at the beginning of the new era. This newer, explicitly modest way of dressing the dead was in accordance with the common law by which all men are equal in death. The *tahirim* had symbolic meanings: white color was a symbol of pure soul and forgiveness, and loose parts without knots and borders originated from the Talmudic and post-Talmudic beliefs about resurrection and the beginning of life on the other side, which the dead would enter unbound by clothes and knots. (For that reason, it was unacceptable for Jews to dress the dead in traditional clothes). The magic power of the knot is present both in the Jewish and in other cultures, and it normally carries negative connotations. The knot is a symbol of „bondage" and „entanglement", which could, according to the principles of transferable magic, result in bondage and entanglement in crucial moments, both in life and in death. (It is interesting to repeat here that the custom of unbinding the knots was also applied during difficult child deliveries, as described in Chapter I). The absence of pockets was also a religious symbol, which expressed a specific attitude toward material things. According to the Jewish view of the world, a man is accompanied to the other world by the *Torah* , and by his good deeds, not by his assets (This view stands in absolute contradiction with that of other cultures, such as that of the ancient Egyptians). The custom to open the hands clenched in fists had the same origin. The only material object which the dead took to his grave was his prayer shawl, the *tallith.* During the funeral ceremony, a *tallith* tassel, the *tsitsith,* was cut off, by which the *tallith* lost its sacral value. The act of cutting off the *tsitsith* from the *tallith* symbolically represented the family's encounter with reality, with the fact that the owner was not able to use his prayer shawl any more.

The period between the moment of death and the funeral is called the *aninut* (from *anen* – to grieve, Hebr.) According to the Jewish customs, *aninut* is rather short, because the funeral should not be delayed for more than twenty-four hours. The closest relative, known as *onen* (Hebr.) had a special status during this period. He was released from his regular religious duties and prayers and fully dedicated to thoughts about the dead and tasks connected to the funeral. The *onen* was also subject to certain restrictions in his diet; he was not allowed to eat meat and drink spirits. According to the *Talmud* regulations the man in mourning must not be comforted during the period of *aninut,* when he is overwhelmed with pain because of the loss of the loved one. No words of comfort are appropri-

ate under these circumstances; they could even be offensive in moments when the consciousness is pervaded with deep sorrow in the realization that the beloved person is gone for ever. The *aninut* was accompanied by different local customs. A very interesting one involved pouring water in front of the house where someone died. Death was „announced in silence" by pouring water because Jews avoided to spread bad news directly. Also, according to the Jewish religious laws, members of the social class called the *kohanim* (priests, Hebr.) i.e., members of the clergy, which were by their descent obliged to perform certain religious duties, had to stay at the prescribed distance from the deceased's house in order to remain symbolically clean. The role assigned to water, as the symbolic carrier of the message of death, was also connected to certain beliefs of pagan origin, according to which the spirit of the dead circled around the body for some time, and the water prevented it from approaching the living ones and attacking them. (In Judaism, like in other religions, fear from the other world is very much present despite the attempts of the religious scholars to approach death and treat it as naturally as possible). Another widely spread custom, both in the Jewish and in other cultures, is to cover the mirror or turn it to the wall so the spirit of the dead could not be reflected in it. It was also a gesture performed for the sake of the living, so that the people in mourning could not see their faces twisted with sorrow. Furthermore, it was to prevent them from the inappropriate feeling of vanity in these difficult moments.

A distinctive act used to express grief for the loss of a dear person was *keri 'ah* (tearing off clothes, Hebr.) which belongs to the oldest group of Jewish customs. Tearing off clothes was usually performed before the funeral, at the cemetery or in the chapel, beside the coffin. The ritual was performed standing up, in compliance with the Biblical belief that ill fortune and sorrow should be accepted with the head held high and following certain rules: when grieving for the father or the mother a piece of clothing one inch long was torn off, from the left-hand side toward the heart, while when grieving for other relatives, a piece of clothing from the right-hand side was torn off. While *keri 'ah* for the father or the mother was performed by hand, which was more difficult, for the others a knife was used to cut off the clothes from top to bottom. This ritual was performed by the regiously underage members as well, i.e., by boys under thirteen and girls under twelve. *Keri'ah* was not performed on Saturdays, during holidays, and if the news of death arrived more than thirty days after the moment of death. There were no time limitations only in cases of death of one's parents. For them, *keri 'ah* was always performed.

According to the Jewish religious customs, the deceased is buried into the ground, in a coffin made of flat, unprocessed boards, without ornaments and metal nails[3]. These strict religious rules resulted from certain modifications of the common law burial procedures. In the period BC coffins made of wood, stone and clay were used, and they were decorated by paintings and inscriptions. During the Hasmonean rule, near the end of the BC era, it was customary to collect bones of the dead and place them into boxes made of stone or clay. It is supposed that during the Talmudic period the dead were carried to the cemetery on stretchers, and that coffins were used under special circumstances, only if the dead had to be taken to a remote place. In the Middle Ages, the regulations did not dictate burials in coffins. Even in the 16th century the cabalistic belief prevailed according to which the deceased must be in direct contact with earth, which followed the Biblical principle that upon death the man returns to the state of nothingness. However, in time, coffins of the appropriate form gradually came into use. A simple coffin – *aron metim* (coffin, Hebr.), symbolized modesty and humbleness in the face of God, and it followed the above cited Biblical principle. When *Hevra Qaddisha* prepared the deceased for the funeral, the coffin was closed and no one was allowed to open it afterwards. In South Serbia and in Bosnia the deceased was carried to the cemetery in a simple and unpainted coffin which was then broken above the grave and put into the ground together with the body.

The custom to wake by the uncovered coffin, that is, to expose the body before the funeral (typical of Christian cultures) was also used by Jews in the early Talmudic period. The ancient Jews used to leave the face of the deceased uncovered. However, this custom was later on abolished for moral reasons, as the lower classes of the Jewish society could not afford embalming the body, which would temporarily stop the decay. In order to prevent emberassment among the poor members of the community, all coffins were sealed before the funeral. Cremation or other burial procedures, mostly inherited from pagan times, were never practiced among the Jews.

The funeral – *kevura* (Hebr.) was performed within twenty-four hours from the moment of death, according to the religious laws, but it was not allowed on a *Sabbath* (Saturday) as well as on *Yom Kippur* – Repentance day (which falls on the 1 Oth day from *the Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year). These are sacred religious holidays when any kind of work is forbidden. To postpone a funeral under regular circumstances was considered humiliating for the deceased and it was religiously and ethically stigmatized (every deceased had the right to be buried, regardless of who he was or what a sin he had committed. According to the *Bible*, to remain unburied represented a great unhappiness which nobody deserved). When attending a funeral, it

was not allowed to „take advantage of the opportunity" and visit the graves of relatives. The reason was predominantly a formal one, and its purpose was to maintain the assumed respect for the dead whose funeral was the reason for coming to the cemetery. However, a pagan motive cannot be excluded in this case either. There is a belief that demons attend funerals and therefore nobody should leave the funeral procession and wander around the cemetery alone. The cemetery should be left as soon as possible after the funeral. The funeral procession – *levaya* (Hebr.) – was a big *Mitzvah* and was carried out regardless of who the deceased was and what (good or bad) deeds he had done during his life. In case there were several funerals scheduled in one day, any social discrimination was, again, forbidden. There was a simple solution: the first to be buried was the one who died first. In the Talmudic times, the funeral procession stopped six times before reaching the grave. The symbolism of this ritual pauses is connected to the explanation given in the *Midrash*[4]. In a man's life there are six basic stages which could be interpreted in the following manner: childbirth and the first year of life – when the child receives only care and affection from his environment; early childhood – when the child develops interests for the world around him and attempts to touch everything without any idea of what is clean or unclean; youth – which is full of impatient expectations and desire for the opposite sex; younger mature age – married life; middle mature age – when a man strives to provide for his family, especially his children; and finally, the old age – when the man loses his strength. However, one pagan element is also likely to be present: it is believed that these pauses play a protection role because they disorientate and obstruct the demons who follow the procession. It is also likely that formal side of griefing for the dead developed from this symbolism, expressed as the hesitation before the final parting. In time, the number of stops during the procession was reduced to only three, but the custom has remained a part of the burial ceremony to the present day. Since the relatives of the deceased were in charge of the funeral arrangements, their duty was expressed symbolically as each relative would throw three shovels of soil onto the coffin. Handling shovel was carried out according to the principle of transferable magic; the shovel was not handed to another relative directly after use. It was placed on the ground first in order to prevent transfer of ill fortune from one person to the other. Certain data from the *Talmud* indicate that dill was placed on the grave. Bringing and arranging flowers on the grave was not a Jewish custom.

The Jewish rules do not allow exhumation, except in special cases: namely, when the bones should be taken from a non-Jewish cemetery to a Jewish one, or transferred to the Holy Land.

According to the *Talmud*, mourning consists of four phases. The first and the shortest one is called the *aninut* – from the moment of death to the funeral. The funeral was followed by a period of seven-day mourning, known as the *shiva* (seven, Hebr.). Friends and neighbors, or members of the *Hevra Qaddisha* prepared the first meal for the family in mourning. The meal consisted of boiled eggs, bread and lentil. Bread, eggs and lentil carried symbolic meaning for the Jews. In the Jewish culture, but also in some other ancient cultures, an egg was a symbol of life and resurrection, and an egg in a shell was associated with the introvert nature, which was the prescribed form of mourning. Lentil was used at childbirth (as a „welcome to a baby boy") as well as in mourning, again as a symbol of the circular course of life and death. The first meal – *se 'udah havra* (meal for comfort) was brought in baskets made of osier, regardless of the social or financial situation of the family in mourning (again, in an attempt to to make the rich and the poor equal in mourning). The descriptive name of the sevenday mourning period, „to sit the *shiva*", implies how the family in mourning should behave; they must not leave the house, and they should sit on the floor or low tripods, dressed in soft clothes and without shoes (in socks or soft slippers). Such behavior was used to express a certain state of mind, i.e., the concentration on sorrow for the loss of a loved one. During the *shiva* period, the mourners were not to be disturbed by routine jobs and tasks. All practical and personal activities, such as cooking, washing, hair cutting, sexual intercourse between husband and wife, etc., stopped during the *shiva* period. Originally, the *shiva* was respected in cases of death of the following relatives: mother, father, son, daughter, brother and unmarried sister, and later, for the dead husband or wife. During the *shiva* period, a candle or an icon lamp remained lit all the time. However, „sitting" the *shiva* should not be taken literally. It was enough for the mourners to sit for an hour or two during a day. Visits were allowed but according to the determined protocol. The visitor could sit with the mourner until the mourner nods his head indicating by this gesture that he wants to be left alone. Spontaneous conversations were not allowed. The visitor could answer a question, but he could not ask a question or initiate conversation. It is unknown how old the custom of *shiva* is (it is one of the oldest Jewish customs) or why it whether its duration (seven days) has any symobolic meaning.

The third period of mourning which overlaps with the *shiva* for the first seven days is called the *sheloshim* (thirty, Hebr.). As its name indicates, this period lasts for thirty days, and it starts after the funeral of the closest relative or a husband/wife. After the period of *shiva* , ban on certain activities is prolonged for thirty days. The banned activities are: hair cuts, shaving, at-

tending parties and ceremonies including weddings and circumcisions. Only the circumcision of the mourner's own son, if it should falls during the *sheloshim* period, can be organized. Important religious holidays: *Rosh Hashanah,* the Jewish New Year and the pilgrimage holidays: *Pesah, Shavouth* and *Sukkoth* are also given priority over the *sheloshim,* and the 30-day mourning period is not observed in full if it coincideds with one of these holidays. As the black color symbolized morning, it was customary to be dressed in black during the *sheloshim.* It is interesting that the Orthodox Jews of modern times abandoned this very widely spread mourning symbol as they consider it to be of pagan origin.

In special cases, when the notice about the death of a close relative was delayed, two rules had to be followed: if the notice arrived before the expiration of the 30-day period from the day of the death, the mourners were obliged to respect the mourning customs of *shiva* and *sheloshim* in full, counting the days from the moment the notice arrived. If the notice arrived after thirty days from the moment of death, the customs were symbolically performed within just one hour.

A man in mourning for the loss of a person was called *avel* and his behavior and the state of mind were marked by term *avelut* (mourning, lament, Hebr.). The appropriate grieving behavior was prescribed by regulations called the *dine avelut.* However, it should be pointed out that the philosophy of Judaism strives toward balancing out discrepancies between the prescribed behavior through which a man should show his grief, and his emotional and psychological state of mind which is caused by the death of a close person. Customs and personal experience stand in correlation in this matter, conditioned by tradition, education and development of particular attitudes toward the world, including life and death. All this considered, the mourning period was understood as necessary and normal, but the grief could not be allowed to turn into depression or other more serious mental disorder. The custom instructed not only how to express grief, but also how to overcome it and continue living. The period of *sheloshim,* therefore, represented a transitional stage which should lead to the normalcy of the everyday life. Only mourning over death of a parent lasted a whole year.

The fourth mourning phase for the duration of one year from the death of the relative is marked by the term *sana* (year, Hebr.).

The death anniversary was called *yahrzeit* by the Ashkenazim, and *anjos* or *anju* by the Sephardim. The custom to mark the anniversary of someone's death can be traced back to Biblical times. (Special terms such as *jahrzeit* or *anju* were introduced much later). The memorial service for deceased relatives and nationally recognized individuals have been given on

the *yahrzeit*, i.e., the *anju* from ancient times. In many communities there is a custom to fast on a death anniversary, in order to mark respect for the deceased and repentance for the supposedly or actually committed sins. That day should be dedicated to charitable activities. The date of the anniversary is counted from the day of death (according to the Jewish calendar). If the family did not know the exact date of the relative's death, they chose one day of a year for the memorial service. On the day of the anniversary, the family visited the grave, and kept a candle lit for twenty-four hours in the house. The candlelight was considered to be a symbol of the deceased's soul and consequently associated with tho idea of immortality.

The prayer of the mourners is called the *Kaddish* (holy, Aram.)[5] . This prayer is two thousand years old and was originally written in the Aramaic language of ancient Jews from Palestine. Except for the last few verses, which were written in the literary variety of Hebrew, the *Kaddish* is recited in Aramaic even now in the Jewish communities all over the world. At the beginning, the *Kaddish was* a short prayer which followed regular sermons in Aramaic language. The *Kaddish* is not discussed in the *Talmud,* as it was not an integral part of the sermon itself. In the course of time, it was introduced as the ending to certain services, and later on, as the ending to public readings of the *Torah* or the *Talmud.* During the Christian crusades and the horrible pogroms of the Jews in the 12th century, the *Kaddish* became a prayer of mourning and has been used for the same purpose to the present day.

Through the *Kaddish* prayer, a man shows his devotion to God and his readiness to accept, without reservation, His Judgment, whatever it might be.[6] During the year of mourning, as well as on the day of the death anniversary, the *Kaddish* is being recited three times a day, standing up, for eleven months. (In some Jewish communities it is customary that everybody stands up during the prayer). At first, the prayer was said for dead parents only. Gradually, it became a religious ritual of universal value which referred to all dead. The reason why the *Kaddish* is read for eleven and not twelve months lies in the mystic belief that non believers are punished by remaining in hell for twelve months. Saying the mourning prayer for the parents for a whole year (which was customary in ancient times) would imply that they were treated as sinners. Therefore, the period for saying the mourning prayer was shortened for one month. The *minyan* – the quorum often men of religious age – was needed to perform the *Kaddish.* The prayer was recited also by a man from the family in mourning, preferably a son. Daughters did not take part in the mourning prayers, even when the family had no sons. The rabbinical court did not, however, explicitly prohibit such an exemption to the general rule. A spiritual power of the *Kaddish* has not at any time during the

two thousand years of Jewish religious and social history lost any of its spiritual value, nor has it undergone any transformations or alterations.

There also existed special prayers said for the rest of the dead's soul. The Ashkenazim had a prayer called *El male rahamim* ("God, full of mercy"), which was sung during the funeral, on the last day of the *sheloshim*, at th*sYahrzeit* memorial service, as well as on the days of the *Yitzkor* a memorial service which follows the religious holidays *Yom Kippur, Shemini atzeret,* on the last day of *Pesah* and on the second day of the *Shavout* In this century, the victims of the holocaust and the Jewish soldiers killed during the Second World War are also being regularly mentioned in this prayer. The Sephardi counterpart to the *El male rahamim* prayer is the *Ashkava* prayer ("Rest in peace") which is said at the end of the funeral at the cemetery, and during the days when *theTorah* is read in the temple (Saturdays, Mondays and Thursdays). After singing the *Ashkava,* the Sephardim gave charitable gifts, both to the temple and the cemetery, and to the members of community in need. The Sephardim did not have special days for memorial services. They were held during the regular readings of the *Torah* and after returning the *Torah* to the „Holy chest".

The Ashkenazim, on the other hand, have developed a complex religious rite which is regularly applied during memorial services. Ever since the times of the crusades they have been praying for souls of their dead after reading the *Torah* in the temple. The term *Ashkarat neshama* (memorial service for the dead) is used for all the memorial services practiced by the Ashkenazim, one of which is a special prayer called the *Yitzkor* ("let be remembered"), which revives the memories of individual members of the community, close or distant relatives, and on certain occasions, of historical characters.

It is unknown whether the Jews from the Biblical times had special locations designated as burial sites. More recently, certain Jewish communities in the Diaspora started constructing Jewish cemeteries in an attempt to maintain the unity of their communities far away from the mainland. A Jewish cemetery – *beth kevarot* (cemetery – Hebr.) is a sacred place: food, drinks or cigarettes arc not allowed there. Likewise, it is prohibited to enter the cemetery with the head uncovered. A tombstone – *matzeva* must be constructed above the deceased's grave. The tombstone can be placed on the grave at various points in time during the mourning period: after the *shiva* period is completed, on the last day of the *sheloshim,* or, at the latest, after a year from the death. A hidden pagan element can be noticed in the term *nefesh* (soul, Hebr.) which is used to mark the tombstone in the rabbinical literature. The concept of *nefesh* is derived from traditional beliefs according to

which the soul of the dead floats over his body (similar concepts are present in many pagan cultures which consider tombstones „dwellings" of the souls). The construction of tombstones is a very old custom which is confirmed by archeological findings and comments given in the *Mishna* . In the Diaspora, during the first eight centuries, the inscriptions were mostly in Greek or in Latin, but in time, they were replaced by inscriptions in Hebrew or in the language of the local community. The differences between the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim were also noticeable in the shape of the tombstones. The Sephardi tombstones were placed horizontally, while the Ashkenazim placed their tombstones vertically.

The Jewish custom to leave a stone on the grave upon each visit is based on the belief in the power of the dead's soul. This belief is part of both the folklore and the *Talmud,* and it is also present in writings of other religions. It is believed that a soul of the dead remains aware of everything that is going on in this world, and that it can even punish or reward the living. However, it is not capable to communicate with the living in a direct manner. A symbolic contact between the living and the dead is established by placing the stone on the grave. This act is the proof to the dead person's soul that he has not been forgotten and that he still enjoys the respect he was given while alive.

However, frequent visits to the cemetery are not recommended. The appropriate time to visit the dead is determined by the rabbis. The visits are usually allowed before important holidays, during the ten days between the *Rosh Hashanah* and the *Yom Kippur,* as well as on death anniversaries. During holidays and on *Sabbaths* visits were not allowed.

Religious written documents are treated with the same respect as human beings. At Jewish cemeteries there is always a special grave, called the *genizah*, in which the religious books are buried which are not in use any more. The *genizah* also has its tombstone which is decorated by an open book carved in stone.

Burials of suicide victims present the only exception to the deep and sincere respect that the Jewish community expresses toward its dead and, consequently, toward its cemetery which is symbolically called the *beth olam* (the house of eternity, Hebr.) and the *beth hayym* (the house of life, Hebr.). Suicide [8] was not treated as a crime, but it stood in deep conflict with God's will. Although suicides always result from great despair, it is the man's a holy duty to care for his life and to make every effort to prolong it. Within the Jewish community, the reasons for the desperate act of suicide were objectively analyzed, and suicides could be justified only if they were committed under unknown circumstances, or in the state of temendous depression caused by some pressures or fears. In cases of suicide committed for heroic or moral

reasons, like the collective suicide in the fortress of Masada after the Second Temple was destroyed and the battle against the Romans was lost, it was even allowed to break the laws of the *Torah* due to the specific conditions under which the suicides were committed. However, suicides committed due to immoral or criminal acts were not ajustified and the dead were excommunicated from the Jewish religious community. Such suicide victims were buried far away from the family graves – at the edge of the cemetery – without any mourning rites.

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[1]Cadik Danon, Zbirka pojmova iz judaizma (Collection of Judaism Terms), SJOJ, Belgrade, pp. 173-188. Danijela Danon, Jevrejski žalobni običaji (poseban pregled termina i običaja) (Jewish mourning rites, a special overview of terms and customs), SJOJ, Belgrade, 1996.

[2]James George Frasier: The golden branch: A study of magic and religion, Belgrade 1937, p. 313.

[3]The original burial procedure involved the use of a botttomless coffin, so that the body would be placed directly into the ground.

[4]Danijela Danon, Jevrejski žalobni običaji (Jewish mourning rites), SJOJ, Belgrade, 1996, p. 6.

[5]Cadik Danon: Zbirka pojmova iz judaizma (Collection of Judaism Terms), SJOJ, Belgrade 1996, p. 179.

[6]The content of the Kaddish is provided in the translation by Eugen Verber: Uvod u jevrejsku vera (Introduction to Judaism), Belgrade 1993, p. 109.

[7]Danijela Danon, Jevrejski žalobni običaji (Jewish mourning rites), SJOJ, Belgrade, 1996, p. 10.

[8]Cadik Danon: Zbirka pojmova iz judaizma (Collection of Judaism Terms), SJOJ, Belgrade 1996, pp. 188-189.