

He Wouldn't Be Caught Dead in a Shroud

by Rabbi Elchonon Zohn

It was late one Saturday night, a few hours after the end of Shabbos, when I arrived at the funeral home to perform a Tahara - to wash and dress the body of an old Jewish man for burial. I am a member of the Chevra Kadisha, the group responsible to care for Jewish people and properly prepare them for their final journey to Olam Habah -The World to Come. I was particularly inspired this night and was looking forward to this particular Tahara. This man had been described to me as a "Real Tzaddik" by a person who should have this knowledge, his wife of many years. She told me, in a heavy Yiddish accent, he had been a veteran of WW I and never missed a day of putting on his Tefillin while in the US Army.

I was therefore completely taken by surprise when the funeral director informed me that Mr. Klein (a fictitious name) was to be left on the table and not placed in the casket so that after we completed the traditional Tahara he could be dressed in his suit by the funeral director on top of the traditional burial shroud we would be dressing him in. What a contradiction to have this "Tzaddik" dressed in a suit. How unfitting for a man so committed to following Jewish law under the most trying circumstances to be denied the special beauty and meaning inherent in Jewish traditional burial. I was convinced this must be a mistake. After receiving the consent of the funeral director I proceeded to call the wife. As soon as she realized why I was calling she began to cry. "It is not me who wants this, I know it is wrong, but it is my daughter. She insists that her father be dressed in a suit and I cannot fight with her anymore." She gave me her daughter's number although she insisted I was wasting my time.

It was clear as soon as I introduced myself as a Rabbi that my call was not welcome. She knew why I was calling and she had no interest in discussing the issue. I explained that the decision was hers, but that I was confused because of her father's commitment to pray and put on Tefillin while serving in the US Army during World War I seemed rather heroic and that it appeared that throughout his life, he was a truly observant man. Why, then, would she want him buried in a suit which was contrary to Jewish tradition? She answered me, "Rabbi, you didn't know my father. In fact, he was a very

Orthodox man who went to Shul three times a day and was observant to the best of his ability, but the love of his life was his clothes. *You see, my father was the nattiest dresser who ever lived.* Since his retirement many years ago, his greatest joy was to go shopping and build a wardrobe second to none. Every night, he would spend a half hour or more laying out his clothing for the next day. His shirt had to match the socks and the shoes had to match the belt, and everything had to be just perfect. He only wore the finest clothes and so, I cannot see my father being buried in a shroud." I now understood and was convinced that she truly loved and respected her father and wanted to send him to the next world in the way she felt he would have wanted to go. I conveyed my understanding and requested that she answer a couple of questions. I asked her what her father wore when he went to sleep and she told me he wore the finest silk pajamas. I then asked what he wore when he went swimming and she immediately answered "the most expensive designer trunks." I then asked her why her father wouldn't wear the suit that she had brought to the funeral home when he went to bed or when he went swimming. At this point, she became a bit upset and said "Rabbi, are you making fun at a time like this?" I explained that, on the contrary, I was just attempting to make a very important point. "Your father was always concerned to be *appropriately* well-dressed. Have you given any thought as to what might constitute appropriate dress for the occasion of burial?" I went on to explain the Jewish belief that when we die, the Neshama -the soul appears before G-d for our last Day of Judgment to ask to be forgiven as well as to ask for the needs of our family and others. In light of that, what better way to be dressed than to wear the same set of clothing worn by the Kohen Gadol - the High Priest, when he entered the Kodosh HaKodoshim - the Holiest of Holies on Yom Kippur?

I continued to explain that the traditional burial shroud is a beautiful full set of clothing, including a hat, shirt, pants, jacket or Kittel, and belt. This set of clothing is generally available in fine linen, sewn by hand, or simple muslin sewn by machine. The fine linen set, most closely resembling that worn by the Kohen Gadol, and for other Kabbalistic reasons as well, is the preferred set. I pointed out that because her father was to be dressed in a suit over the shroud, the funeral director chose to have us dress him in the cheaper muslin shroud. This was certainly something her father, "*the nattiest dresser who ever lived*" would not have chosen as his last set of clothing. I was tempted to say her father wouldn't be caught dead in such a set of shrouds, but because of the seriousness of the moment I controlled myself. She began to cry and

asked that I leave the suit for her to pick up at the funeral home at the time of the funeral. We went on to do a full Tahara, with a set of linen shrouds, and in fact, it was one of the most meaningful and inspiring experiences I ever had as a member of the Chevra Kadisha.

An important lesson can be learned from this story when contrasted to the story in this week's Parsha. An old man is dying. He knows that his time on this earth is drawing to an end. He seeks to ensure the fulfillment of his wishes after his death. He summons the most successful of his children, the son most capable of fulfilling his request. He asks for his total commitment to this project. He asks him to swear, to take an oath. Swearing is not something either of them considers lightly. However, his concern to see his last wishes fulfilled compels him to take this action.

The old man is our Patriarch Yaakov, summoning his son Yosef, now the second most powerful man in Egypt. His final request is: "And you will perform with me Chesed V'Emet, kindness and truth, please do not bury me in Egypt." Many commentators have asked the question, "What is the meaning of 'kindness and truth'? Is there kindness that is false?" One answer is that, in fact, kindness needs to be guided by truth. Truth as defined by Torah which is known as "Torat Emes", the Torah of truth. Only Torah can provide direction that is totally objective and not an expression of one's own subjective bias or agenda. The story above is a perfect illustration of that concept. The need to be guided by Torah applies to all of life's decisions. However, the decisions at the end-of-life may be the most difficult because we are focusing on the needs not only of a body but of a Neshama - a soul we really can't relate to. We are preparing that person for a journey to a world that is spiritual and beyond our realm of experience.

Had Yosef made the decision how best to bury his great father, he might very well have decided to bury him in Egypt. After all, would it not have been a source of strength and comfort to his children and grandchildren, in their exile and servitude in Egypt, to have the grave of their father and grandfather at which to visit and pray? Nevertheless, Yaakov, guided by the truth of Torah, understood, among other reasons, that were he to remain in Egypt, it was likely that he would be deified and his place of burial would become a place of unholy worship. There is no doubt that most of us when faced with decisions regarding the final arrangements for burial of a loved one are guided by a sense of kindness and a desire to do what is right. That subjective sense of

kindness can allow the daughter of a deeply religious man, who happens to be a "natty dresser" to be buried in his favorite suit. Unless we are guided by the truth of Torah, we can easily make choices based on personal feelings, compounded by our ignorance of the depth, the beauty, and the meaning inherent in the Jewish traditions that are followed at these times.

An article that appeared on another Jewish website just a couple of weeks ago entitled *No Ice Cream At My Funeral*, by Bassi Gruen, illustrates this very idea with regard to how funerals are conducted. However, all of the decisions we make at the time of death of a loved one are to reflect the Truth of Torah. The choice between a shroud and one's favorite clothing was illustrated in the story told. Other examples include the choice between burial and cremation and between an immediate or delayed burial.

Burial v. cremation: It is estimated that 30% of those in the US are cremated. This is more prevalent in the western part of the country. Reasons for this are generally financial or ecological in nature. To counter that it should be sufficient to realize that the requirement of burial is Biblical and that Hashem commanded in-ground burial. After Adam sinned, Hashem decreed, "Dust you are and you shall return unto dust". The return of the physical body to its original dust is an important component of the process of atonement for any physical sinful misdeeds or immoral pleasures one may have experienced in life. That atonement allows the soul to be cleansed and go on to a world of eternal reward. The earth is also the source of all life and its cycle of decomposition and regeneration. Just as in plant life a seed is placed in the ground and it regenerates and blossoms forth into a magnificent new plant, Jewish belief is that we will be resurrected and reborn after the coming of Moshiach and live on eternally in a world of total peace and tranquility. We affirm this in the second blessing of every Silent Prayer at least three times each day. Is cremation worth forfeiting the opportunity for proper atonement or the gift of eternal life?

Immediate v. delayed burial: The decision to bury immediately, even just hours after death, or to wait a day or two before burying a loved one is a frequent choice that families are confronted with. Often there is a need to simply exhale or to get everything together, practically and emotionally. Again, the Biblical requirement for immediate burial should suffice for us to be determined to get it done immediately. We should also be aware that the period between death and burial is one of great angst for the Neshama - the

soul. It finds itself in a state of limbo, overwhelmed by the sense of lost opportunity and an intense desire to move on to the Next World. If we were to properly focus on the needs of our loved one as defined by our Torah there is little doubt that we would choose to bury immediately and work out our own issues later.

It is no wonder that the designation given to the work of the Chevra Kadisha, the Jewish Burial Society, is Chesed Shel Emet, true kindness. It is because everything done by the Jewish Burial Society is a reflection of Jewish tradition as defined by the truth of Torah. May we all deal with our loved ones, when the time comes, with true kindness.

- See more at:

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