


A Simple Casket

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By Elissa Felder

With great dignity and love we prepared two ladies, close to 100 years old each, for their burials the next day. After performing the taharah – the Jewish ritual of washing the body after death, we dressed them in plain white shrouds modeled on the garments worn by the High priest in the Holy Temple on Yom Kippur.

We sprinkled sand from Israel on their closed eyes, their hearts and around their bodies. We wrapped them in a linen sheet and said prayers that they should be carried to the higher realms speedily and that God should watch over and shelter them under His protective shade; binding them up in eternal life.

Then we placed each body into very expensive, very solid mahogany caskets.

The contrast was astounding. We had just been engaged in a very spiritual, holy act of preparation for burial, and now we were placing them in shiny, expensive, padded boxes.

I have worked on the local burial society for many years, touching death several times a week. In that preparation room we feel the soul of each woman in our care. Our souls intertwine in that space; it is a very powerful experience. Death is the end of our journey in this world where physicality and spirituality intermingle. We are enjoined to enjoy this world and to elevate the physical by using it well. In our lives we struggle to focus on spirituality while also being physically engaged.

Death begins the process of the soul uncoupling from its body. When we say farewell to our loved one we focus on the good they have done in the world. We elevate their souls by doing kind acts and giving charity in their memory. The currency of the Next World is the goodness we have performed in this world. We dress the deceased in plain white, linen shrouds which have no pockets to remind us that we don't take anything with us except our good name and the spiritual growth that we have achieved during our allotted lifetime.

At a funeral we focus on the person's spiritual nature. An expensive coffin is a distraction. The deceased does not need it. Our love is not measured by how much money we spend on the casket.

When we do acts of kindness, learn Torah, say Kaddish, help others and give to charity in the merit of our loved ones, we change the world for the better and the soul of the deceased gets the credit.

What is the value of spending thousands of dollars on a casket that will be put in to the ground within hours of being purchased never to be seen again?

All kosher coffins have holes in the bottom to connect the body with the ground. According to Jewish law, we don't need caskets at all; it is a concession to American law. In fact, in Israel there are no caskets. The body, wrapped in a shroud, is placed straight into the ground.

Death is the quintessential equalizer. We all pass on from this world. For every woman in our care we say the same prayers, wash them the same way and dress them in the same garments. In some respects the casket is a hindrance to the required process of returning to the earth. We love the person in the box, not the box itself. Choosing a simple, plain pine box takes the focus away from the casing and puts the emphasis on the treasure inside.