

5 customs

Mourning the death of a loved one is a precious task which religions and cultures accommodate and prescribe in various ways and over various time periods. Here are five customs found in contemporary Jewish practices. Reflect too on your own religious and cultural customs for mourning the dead.

1. Immediately. Jewish tradition discourages any denial of death or delay in burial. There is no viewing of the body. Soon after death, the body of the deceased is covered and buried in a closed casket. In Israel many are buried without casket, in a simple shroud.

2. Seven days. After the funeral begins a seven day period of mourning known as 'sitting *shiva*'. During this week, mourners remain at home, sit on low stools, and are brought food and comfort by visiting members of their community.

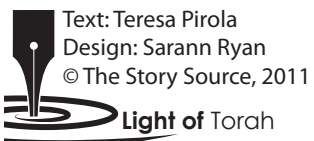
4. Thirty days. *Shiva* ('seven') is followed by a less intense mourning period of thirty days called

Shloshim ('thirty'). Mourners rejoin the community but refrain from certain actions which are considered celebratory.

4. One year. Following *Shloshim* comes a year of *aveilut* ('mourning') for those who have lost a parent.

5. Each year. While 'normal' life resumes after a year of mourning, a number of annual memorial occasions are observed. The most important of these is *yahrzeit*, the anniversary of the death. This day includes the lighting of a 24-hour candle, the synagogue service and the reciting of the *Kaddish*, a traditional prayer of mourning.

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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Why reflect on Torah?

The Second Vatican Council ushered in a new era of reconciliation in Jewish-Christian relations. Since then, further important statements and gestures have been made by bishops, theologians and interfaith dialogue groups. While this is cause for rejoicing, there remains much to be done to bring this new awareness to grassroots communities. As one prominent Jewish commentator recently observed:

"Perhaps as important as theological reflection remains the need to implement the changes initiated at Vatican II and deepened by John Paul II, not only in the Vatican but also in the pulpits and pews. John Paul II's teachings about Jews will endure, but will they trickle down to the world's 800 million Catholics?"

— Edward Kessler,
The Tablet 30 April 2011.

This challenge is precisely why the *Light of Torah* publication exists: to reach the parishioner in the pew via a brief, readable weekly leaflet that introduces the vision of *Nostra Aetate* and offers a concrete experience of learning about Torah through the wisdom of the Jewish tradition.

Issue #40

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Numbers 19:1—22:1

Chukat: 'law [that]'



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Numbers 19:1—22:1

A recurring theme about death emerges in this week's Torah portion. It opens with a purification ritual for those made impure by contact with a corpse, human bones or a grave. The death of Miriam immediately follows. Later in the portion Aaron dies, and Moses is told of his own death which will take place before reaching the promised land. Meanwhile, the Israelites are painfully aware of their mortality, and many of them die from the venom of deadly snakes.

Read as much as you can of this portion, then let's focus on Miriam's death at the beginning of chapter 20.

Tasting Torah

As noted at left, a theme of death permeates this portion. Yet, paradoxically, so too does a theme of life. The events described are said to take place in the final (40th) year before entering Canaan, thus the Israelites are tantalizingly close to realizing God's promise of a new life in their own land. The lifegiving imagery of water and wells holds significance in this portion (20:2-13; 21:16-18). In addition, the copper snake acts as an effective symbol of healing and restored life (21:4-9). Ponder these interweaving themes of death and life as you read the text.

Touching Torah

"Miriam died there, and was buried there" (20:1).

Consider the Torah's treatment of the deaths of Miriam (20:1) and Aaron (20:22-29). The contrast is striking, isn't it? Aaron's death is described at some length and with certain emotion. The whole community observes a 30 day period of mourning. Yet the one-verse reference to Miriam's death is poignantly terse. Why the difference? Is she less important? Less loved? Do we presume a patriarchal bias in the history of the text's development? Can we reconcile this brevity with the way Torah elsewhere speaks of Miriam as a chosen co-leader along with Moses and Aaron? *"I redeemed you from the house of bondage, and I sent before you Moses, Aaron and Miriam"* (Micah 6:4).

Depthing Torah

Upon deeper reflection, we see that Miriam's death does not go unnoticed in the text. Look at what happens. The moment she dies, the very next sentence reads: *"The community was without water..."* (20:2), a fact that impacts harshly on the Israelites, even erupting into an attack on Moses to which Moses responds badly, displaying none of his characteristic virtues of patience and trust in the Lord. Why does the community become so unhinged at the moment of Miriam's death? What is God's Word trying to teach us?

In Jewish interpretative traditions, Miriam is associated with water. She saves her baby brother at the Nile, she leads a victory dance at the Red Sea. In rabbinic commentary the Israelites are said to have been accompanied in the wilderness by 'Miriam's well', a miraculous source of fresh water [BT *Shabbat* 35a]. According to Rashi this was through the 'merit' of Miriam. When she dies the well disappears. Can it be that Moses and the community are grieving more than the absence of water? Has the ever-present contribution of Miriam to the wilderness journey been taken for granted until now?

Doing Torah

Continue to reflect on Miriam's death and how it relates to the greater biblical narrative as well as to your own story and contact with death. Can we ever really fathom the impact of death until a loved one is no longer with us?



From the Talmud

"So Moses the servant of the Lord died there..." (Deut. 34:5).
"Miriam died there..." (Num. 20:1)

According to a Talmudic insight,* Miriam, like Moses, died in a most sacred, intimate way: by the Divine kiss. This similarity is deduced by a midrashic play with the word 'there' which the rabbinic mind interprets in the same sense that the Torah uses the expression that Moses died 'there'. What appears to be an extraneous word in the text invites an interpretative insight into the Lord's special love and choice of Miriam.

* *Mo'ed Katan* 27b-28a.

Sources: Bat Kol Institute source book (Jerusalem, 2009); Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam* (San Francisco, 1998); Herczeg, *The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary* (NY: Mesorah, 2011). Scripture: NJPS.