

Jewish Values Exemplified at the Transition from Life to Death

The Jewish life cycle has traditionally been taught in chronological order. Even in the last transition, from life to death, Jewish practices are usually taught from final illness, to funeral, through the first year of mourning. An innovative Jewish educator, Rabbi Joshua Elkin has proposed another way: organizing Jewish practice by the values the customs exemplify. This gives the student a sense not only of “what” is done, but “why.” The values are not in a one to one correlation, but woven throughout the various customs. Matching the customs and values can be a thought provoking exercise.

Rabbi Me'irah Iliinsky will illuminate these eight values with stories from Torah and Talmud, illustrations, and explanations of Jewish practice at the end of life.

The eight values and some practices associated with them are:

1. Facing the reality of death
 - Neither hastening nor prolonging death
 - Shoveling earth upon the grave
 - Various phrases from liturgy
2. Respect for the Dead
 - Shmira*, the guarding of the deceased
 - Taharah*, the ritual washing of the deceased's body
 - Levayah*, attending the funeral
 - Speedy burial
 - Hesped*, eulogy
3. & 4. Equality and Simplicity
 - Plain pine box
 - Simple burial clothing
 - Simple pot luck food for *shiva*, the first period of mourning
 - No flowers at the funeral
5. Full expression of feelings
 - Tearing of clothing
 - Shiva* period set aside to fully feel the loss
6. Communal Responsibility & Support
 - Attending the funeral
 - Kevurah*, Burying the deceased
 - Feeding the mourners their first meal after the funeral
 - Attending *Shiva*
 - Making up a *minyan*, a quorum needed for prayer,
so that the mourners may recite *kaddish*, the mourner's prayer

7. Affirmation of Life

Bikur Holim, Visiting the sick

Ethical Wills

Hesped, eulogy remembering the life of the deceased

Naming babies after the deceased

Articulated, graduated periods of mourning

8. Memory

Headstones

Naming babies after the deceased

Reciting *Kaddish*