

involvement—planning the ritual, taking part in it, contacting others to participate—requires recognition that the death has occurred and that the survivors' lives have been irrevocably altered.

In a funeral service, religious traditions and rituals serve as a “how to” for most people. From childhood on, we learn through our parents and family the traditions and rituals of our religion. We go to Church or Temple and learn the prayers and customs. Many go to Sunday school to partake in a formal learning environment. Our parents instill in us these religious values with the hope that we will practice them and carry them on to our children and grandchildren. Families may often look to religion for familiarity and ease. A religious, “pre-defined” service offers the bereaved a predictable, structured and familiar procedure with a

Many cultures have a formal ceremony to “send off” the soul of their loved ones to the great unknown. A funeral, as we know it, is a ritual that has guidelines outlined by the culture or faith, that facilitate salvation for the dead and healing for the bereaved.

limited amount of decisions to be made. During this emotionally draining time in their lives, religious traditions and rituals can provide much comfort and stability amid chaos. Some families select traditional religious services because they value the spiritual content or the particular ceremony involved, and are comforted by it.

Nowadays, many sects are allowing more ritual participation to aid in the healing process. “Many churches have begun to initiate ritual participation for mourners participating in the death ritual. In the Roman Catholic burial mass and Lutheran burial service, two generally non-participatory examples of funeral service, surviving family members are asked to place the church’s white pall over the casket as the body is moved into the sanctuary. In these services, relatives or friends of the deceased are sometimes asked to read the scriptures or provide a eulogy.”⁴

Medical science has removed much of the mystery of the events leading to the birth of a child. Doctors can explain, in great detail, all stages from conception to birth. Sonograms can provide expectant parents with a “photograph” of their child. Medical problems can be addressed or detected prior to birth. Even the date and time of birth can be a scheduled event. Medical science has also made great strides in extending the life cycle via vaccination, medications, surgical procedures including organ transplants, and machinery. However, death is the final event in the life cycle and it represents the passage into the unknown.

If we do not encourage religious traditions in the funeral service, then we may only be doing harm to the deceased. If there is a God, and if we do all that we can in life to someday reach Him after we have died, we need to finish our life with a proper reli-

gious “send off.” Imagine for a minute, that a close relative died, and you, as the next of kin, have the responsibility to make funeral arrangements. You are a non-religious Jew. Since you do not practice your religion, you decide not to bury but to cremate the deceased, which you know is not encouraged in Judaism. Now imagine, because of your actions, the devastating repercussions of not being buried according to Jewish law. It is the belief of the Chevra Kadisha, the international Jewish burial society, that burial is compatible with the truth that the life of a person does not end; life is eternal. Burial results in purification of the body, and the planting of the seeds in a person’s soul through which he will grow at the time of the Revival of the dead. Other religions have similar beliefs. One does not need to follow the religious laws precisely, but should follow basic laws encouraged by the religion of the deceased to ensure safe passage into the unknown.

As inferred by Tillotson’s quote, “Whether religion be true or false, it must be necessarily granted to be the only wise principle and safe hypotheses for a man to live and die by,” the passage of souls into the hereafter is shrouded in mystery. There is no concrete documentation of what awaits us after death. However, religion provides strength and comfort for the living, a positive outlook for the end of the life cycle, and hope for eternity.

In conclusion, we should look at religious rituals and traditions as giving order and structure to the experience of death, as in all rites of passage. Religion in death provides a vehicle for strengthening family ties, gives energy to the feeling of community, and promotes the sanctity of life. “Rituals provide cultural prescriptions for formal patterns of behavior to guide and sustain the individual during confusing and chaotic periods of transition.”⁵ These rituals and traditions serve not only as a platform to provide comfort and condolence to the mourners, but also as a means of honoring the deceased. “A funeral is not only a vehicle by which society can state a death has occurred but also one that proclaims that a life has been lived.”⁶

Footnotes

1. Klein, Rabbi Isaac. *A Time to Be Born, A Time to Die*. United Synagogue Youth. New York, 1988, p. 6.
2. Weeks, O. Duane, Ph.D. “Using Funeral Rituals to Help Survivors”: *Living With Grief After Sudden Loss*. Hospice Foundation of America: Washington, D.C., 1996, p. 130.
3. IBID. p. 134.
4. IBID. p.131.
5. Canine, John D. *The Psychosocial Aspects of Death and Dying*. Appleton & Lange: Stamford, Connecticut, 1996, p. 225.
6. IBID. p. 225

Bibliography

- Canine, John D. *The Psychosocial Aspects of Death and Dying*. Appleton & Lange: Stamford, Connecticut, 1996.
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