

THE MOMENT OF DEATH

When the pulse of his life stops, the human body –carrier of the soul– must be treated with the utmost respect and honor. The way to take care of the human body in the last moments of life, and immediately after, has been detailed by our religious tradition.

1. During agony, it is forbidden to move the body, to close the eyes of the patient or do anything that might accelerate death. It is also forbidden to speak any matter related to death or burial in the presence of the person nearing death, even if the patient is or seems to be unconscious. It is likewise forbidden to begin or even talk about any arrangements for the funeral or burial before his or her passing away.

2. At the very last moments of life, no men present should leave the room by any means, except those who could become physically or emotionally disturbed. Our tradition considers this moment as one of utmost solemnity. It is therefore a sign of respect for life to remain next to the person that will soon pass to the next world.

3. If the agonizing person is conscious, he or she needs to pronounce the Shema Israel and if possible the Viduy. This last prayer is the confession and repentance from any wrongdoings that he or she could have done in life, towards God and towards other fellowmen. If the dying person is unable to say these prayers by himself, another person can read aloud with him or on his behalf.

4. In Jewish tradition, the moment of death is determined by the interruption of the voluntary respiratory activity. In recent times most Rabbinic authorities identify death with this state: irreversible clinical death. When the cerebral cortex is not anymore in control of the voluntary respiratory activity.

5. In cases where the patient is in a state of clinical death, a competent rabbinic authority should be consulted for any type of procedure. A rabbinical authority should be also consulted for matters related to DNR signing, administration of

medicines or treatments that could accelerate death like morphine drip, in cases of terminal illness, etc.

6. In the Jewish tradition, the body should be buried in its entirety, and in the best possible preserved condition. Therefore, autopsy is not usually allowed. One must notify the medical and legal authorities about this religious norm, so to avoid this proceeding. Should there be any complications, please consult a competent rabbinic authority.

7. The eyes and the mouth of the deceased should be closed by his children, relatives or friends who are present at the last moments. Also the face of the deceased should be covered with a bed sheet.

8. The body should not be moved until it is transferred for the burial, except for a matter of honor or respect, for example, to straighten it if it's in a position or a place which not be appropriate.

9. During the time prior to the funeral, people's behavior must be at par with the circumstances. One must not mention any form of criticism about the deceased. It is only proper to speak about the virtues of the deceased or the arrangements for the funeral.

10. One should notify to the Chebra Kadisha (community institution that makes all arrangements for the cemetery) to make arrangements for the funeral. It is also important that from the moment of death until the burial the body be watched over. If possible, a shomer (guard) should be requested from the Chebra Kadisha or the community assistance to have someone with the body until the burial.. This custom was established by the rabbis to protect the integrity of the body. In ancient times they were afraid it could get desecrated by rodents, animals, etc.