

CHAPTER 5: The burial ceremony.

At the moment of creation of man the Almighty announced "Let us make man on our image and likeness." This plural form (Let "us" make...) implies that God was speaking to another entity, and was object of multiple and profound interpretations. One of them says that the Creator addressed the Earth, inviting the earth, so to speak, to create man. The Creator provides the divine soul and the earth the body. The human body, indeed, is made of earth, atoms. When death occurs, each element returns to its source of origin. The soul goes back to its celestial dimension and the body is reunified with the Earth..."Because you are made of dust of the earth and you shall return to dust of the earth". The soul arrives by its own means to its heavenly soul, but the body has to be taken by the family members to its final resting place, inside the earth.

There is no formal protocol regarding universal burial ceremonies for all Jewish communities. Beyond the basic steps, the order of the funeral varies from community to community. In the following lines I describe in detail the steps of the burial ceremony as is done in our community cemetery.

First, the coffin is downloaded from the car and placed in a special carrier. Then, it is carried by the relatives of the deceased. Women do not take part in carrying the coffin. In other communities, which follow Minhag Yerushalaim, the sons are not allowed to carry the coffin. In our community, however, we do not hold such restrictions and we allow any male to take part of it.

The body inside the coffin is transported until the grave, by hand. We have the tradition to make some stops for men, not for woman. Usually we make seven stops, but if it is Friday or the eve of a Jewish holiday or if there is more than one funeral service to do, we stop only three times.

While the body is carried, the rabbi or the officiant recite *yosheb beseter elyon* (Psalm 91) for a man or *eshet chayil* (Proverbs 30), for a woman.

Once the people arrive to the gravesite the cemetery employes place the body to be downloaded into the grave. There is a mechanic switch to lower the body, that switch is activated by the officiant or by one of the family members.

Once the body is lowered to the ground, the children begin to shovel earth. First, the sons, three times each. Our custom is to stick the shovel into the ground after the third time, without handing it to somebody else. In our community, we allow women to take part in this ritual. They either pour some earth from the land of Israel, which is specially brought for them, or they take a fist of earth from the gravesite and throw it into it, three times.

After the coffin is covered with one layer of earth, and while people still shovel earth into the gravesite, we do the qeri'a.

Before we explain the qeri'a let me clarify that it is absolutely permitted to allow the gentile workers to shovel earth into the grave, by hand or by the means of a machine. In our community, most families cover the first layer of the coffin by themselves and then allow the workers to finish the job. Other families, prefer to cover the entire gravesite by themselves. In any case, this should not be a reason for machloqet, because there is not prohibition involved and every family should be allowed to decide in this matter. Except if it is Friday or the eve of a holiday, when it must be done only what is required.