

When to Start Saying Shiva OR What Would Jesus' Mom Do?

Posted February 21, 2013 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Copyright © 2013 Judith Z. Abrams

BH

Since we're rolling up to Pesach and Easter, I thought we'd take a look at burial practices in ancient Israel. First, we have to know that there were large caves that were used as crypts for multiple bodies. That necessitated a way to get into the crypts repeatedly that would also close them securely. Very large stones were used to close the crypts. They were rolled aside when the tomb was opened.

See these pictures:

http://www.google.com/search?q=burial+tombs+rolling+stones+israel&hl=en&safe=active&client=safari&rls=en&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ei=O1UIUfW4OcT02wWE5IC4CQ&ved=0CAoQ_AUoAQ&biw=1279&bih=758

So our text describes the following dilemma: what if you want to bury someone in a crypt far away but you need to temporarily bury the body in a crypt? Does the period of shivah, the seven most intense days of mourning, start with that original burial or after the second burial? (Our text is from Moed Katan, chapter three, the go-to passage to learn about burial practices.)

An incident occurred with Rabbi Yonah in which he became a mourner and the body of the deceased was moved from one grave to another. He asked Rabbi Chananyah, the colleague of the Rabbis whether he should count the days of shivah from the sealing of the first grave or from the sealing of the second grave. Rabbi Chananyah said to him: Count the days from when the first grave is sealed. (Y. Moed Katan 3:5, 17a1)

The passage goes on at great length, examining various permutations of these scenarios where the person is buried twice and the stone is rolled away from the cave's mouth. It is evident that this was not an uncommon event and, in the end, the sages basically rule that it is better to start saying shivah from the day when the body is in its final resting place. But they allow an enormous amount of flexibility in this matter and that they respect the wishes of the family's leader.

Discussion Questions

1. We experience something akin to this situation today when a corpse is held at a morgue or funeral home for a day or even more. Why is it emotionally more powerful and healing to begin the mourning from the time of the final burial? Do you have a story that illustrates your point? If so, please do share it.
2. With this background, we can look at the stories about the stone being rolled away from Jesus' crypt in its historical context. It would not be an abnormal thing at all to roll the stone away after a few days and take the body to its final resting place. This leads to an interesting question. Jesus is Jewish. Mary is Jewish. They would mourn Jewishly. Did Mary start sitting Shivah after the original burial?
3. After the flesh had decomposed, the bones were collected in urns for interment so that the benches inside the crypt could be used for new corpses? Is this something you could imagine adapting for modern mourning? How or how wouldn't you do this?

As always, looking forward to your insights!