

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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Posted May 26, 2011, by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

BE GOOD TO THOSE WHO REMAIN: TELL THEM WHAT YOU WANT AT YOUR FUNERAL

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A story: a woman I know has been tenderly caring for her mother, who has been going downhill for a few years, now. But in all the time she's spent with her mom, shlepping her to doctor's appointments, etc., they haven't talked about what the mother wants at her funeral. So she will have to make all these decisions just when she is at her most bereaved.

Some of our greatest sages show us how it should be done. For example, Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi gave these instructions on his deathbed:

Rabbi commanded three things on his deathbed. (1) My widow should not move from my house, (2) do not eulogize me in small towns and (3) he who served me during my lifetime should serve me in my death.

"My widow should not move from my house...She should live in the houses just as she lived while her husband was overseas. She uses silver and gold vessels just as she used to while her husband was overseas.

"Do not eulogize me in small towns." Because of the quarrels [if the small towns are too small to do me honor].

"He who served me during my lifetime should serve me in death." Rabbi Hananiah from Sepphoris said: For example, Yose Ephrati and Joseph from Haifa. Rabbi Hizkiah added: Do not use many shrouds on me and let my coffin have holes in the bottom. (Y. Kilayim 9:4)

Rabbi's wife is to stay in their house and live just as well, i.e., very well indeed, for the rest of her life. When the Yerushalmi says, "while her husband was overseas" it means that the wife/widow is still under the protection of her husband, as if he about to return from a long trip.

Perhaps most interesting, is Rabbi's request to be buried in simple shrouds with holes in the bottom of his coffin. He wanted to fulfill the verse, "dust to dust (Genesis 3:19)" as quickly as possible. Rabbi, a millionaire, could have afforded to be buried in silk and mahogany. (In "the more things change" department, it should be noted that Jews have had a tendency to spend more on their lifecycle moments than is prudent for a very long time.)

Discussion Questions:

This web page's questions are practical. Please figure out the answers and not only write them to the rest of us, but WRITE THEM DOWN AND PUT THEM WITH YOUR WILL.

1. You do have a will, don't you? It's where someone knows where it is, right?
2. If your state has advanced medical directives (DNRs) have you gotten one and is it in your medical chart?
3. What do you want on your tombstone? (I know what I want: "Have you said your blessing?" I say it to every student before every class. With this epitaph, I can reach out from the grave to remind them.)
4. Who do you want to do your eulogy? What do you want said in your obituary?
5. What kind of casket do you want? Do you want mahogany or do you want the kids to go to COSTCO and get the cheapest available?
6. Do you want the Chevra Kaddisha (the Jewish burial society)?
7. THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION OF ALL: Have you lived a life of deep connections? (The saddest funeral I ever conducted was for a man who went to work, came home and never made any human connections. His entire estate (some \$750,000) was given to Jewish Family Services. He had never reached out to them while he was alive. There were only 7 people at the funeral, two of whom were the man's lawyer and the lawyer's wife.)

Sorry to BE kind of yelling at you this time, but these decisions and conversations tend to be put off for too long.

I look forward to reading your answers.