

CHAPTER 30 - SICKNESS AND DEATH

by Rabbi Dr. Azriel Rosenfeld

We are required to visit the sick (335:2,9), particularly if we have close ties to them (335:1). Visits may be made repeatedly if this does not bother the sick person (335:2). In any case we should inquire about the sick person's condition and whether anything needs to be done for him (335:8), and should behave respectfully in his presence (see 335:3).

We should pray for the recovery of the sick (335:4-6,8,10), but we must also provide them with competent medical care (336:1). On a physician's responsibilities and on payment for medical treatment see 336:1-3.

A sick person should be encouraged to settle his affairs (335:7). If his illness is serious he should be told to confess his sins, but we should avoid frightening or depressing him (338:1-2); for the same reason we should avoid telling him about the deaths of close relatives (337:1).

A dying person must not be disturbed in any way that may hasten his death (see 339:1), but he should not be left alone to die (339:4). Preparations for burial or mourning should not begin until death has occurred (339:1). Those who are present when a person dies recite the blessing "... the true Judge" (339:3). A person should not eat in the presence of the dead (see 341:1) and it is customary to empty all the containers of water in the vicinity (339:5).

When a person dies his close relatives are required to tear an upper garment at the neckline while standing; see 340:1-2,4,9-14,20,27-31,33-35. The tear should be a handsbreadth long and should not be repaired for 30 days; for a parent it should reach the chest and should never be repaired (340:3,9-10,12-16,19). Tearing is also required by those who are present at the death of a righteous person even if he is not a relative (see 340:5-8,17) or who see or hear of a major disaster (340:36,38) or hear a Jew cursing G-d (340:37); in these last cases the tear should never be fully repaired (340:39). Tearing is not required on hearing about a death after 30 days except in the case of a parent (340:18,32; 396:1,402:4). On tearing for several deaths or in error see 340:21-26.

When a person has died but has not yet been buried his close relatives are forbidden to eat meat, drink wine, wash, do work, or perform any positive commandment (including mourning; see 341:5) even if they are not needed to help prepare for the burial, until the body has been turned over to those who will bury it; see 341:1,3,5. On the Sabbath or a holiday or when burial is not possible these laws do not apply (341:1-2,4). A person should not stay in a place where a relative has died and cannot be buried; see 346:1.

A male KOHEN (see 373:1-2) is forbidden to become impure by contact with any part of a dead body or a limb detached from a living body (see 369:1) and should therefore avoid places where such things may be present (369:1; 372:1) or where someone is about to die (see 370:1). An adult KOHEN is forbidden to make a minor KOHEN impure (373:1), but a son born to a KOHEN as a result of forbidden sexual relations is not forbidden to become impure (373:2). Contact with non-Jewish dead should also be avoided (372:2). "Contact" includes being under the same roof if there is no barrier between them (371:1-4) or being on the same unstable platform (371:6) or being very close (see 371:5). A KOHEN is required to become impure in order to assist with funeral preparations when one of his close relatives has died (see 373:3-9) or if he finds a body and no one else is available to bury it (374:1-3).

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