

Dealing with Death

"To Allāh we belong and to Him do we return."

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Whether it be sudden or expected, the death of a loved one is always a shock to the living as it reminds us of our own mortality and the temporary quality of this life. We are faced with a more vivid sense of reality of Allāh and the true meaning of our existence on this earth. It is a time of intense emotional and spiritual experiences, especially for those nearest to the deceased.

Handling the practical details of a death may add to the frustration and grief of the surviving relatives or friends if they are not prepared beforehand with the knowledge of what to do. Simply knowing certain facts about what should take place in this circumstance can aid considerably in the smooth and peaceful conduct of the practical affairs related to a death.

Responsibilities before death

Before we leave this life, we are commanded to fulfill two important obligations, which if not done can cause the family unnecessary and additional hardship after one's death, namely, preparing a will and eliminating debts. Allāh says:

"Will is prescribed for you, when one of you approaches death and leaves wealth, that he bequeath unto parents and near relatives in kindness. This is a duty for all those who are God-fearing".¹

A will should be written according to Islamic legal requirements and then updated as time passes. Distributing inheritance can be complicated and may require professional assistance. A lawyer should be consulted in order to fulfill the requirements of both Islamic and American laws as this country has certain specifications to which we must adhere.

The will can cover more than financial matters as well. For example, one can stipulate his/her demands for the care and education of the children, for an Islamic burial, or for any other concern. Clarity and thoroughness are extremely vital for the correct application of one's will.

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If one incurs debts, repaying the borrowed money must occupy a priority when making regular monetary decisions. Leaving behind a debt is a grave matter for the deceased as well as the family who inherits it.

At the time of death

Once death occurs the simplicity of the Islamic post-mortem processes should help balance the expected disarray of emotion and perspective. For those who live in cities with sizeable Muslim communities, the Islamic centers or local "Masjids" usually provide assistance in this area. The administrator should be contacted at the time of death, and he would advise the family of the necessary procedure to follow. If the community is without such services, individual families can independently follow these procedures outlined herein.

The Mortuary

Finding a mortuary that allows Muslims to fulfill their religious obligations (i.e., proper washing of the body and conducting the "janāzah" prayers) is of primary importance. The Islamic centers are usually familiar with a mortuary and cemetery which permit the utilization of their facilities for these Islamic duties. If so requested, they may also provide a room for the prayers. The mortuary also prepares the death certificate, provides the casket and use of a hearse to transport the body to the cemetery. In addition, they file a disposition permit approved by local county officials which is forwarded to the cemetery to authorize burial. The cost for these services varies, but one should expect to pay close to \$1000.

After a death, the family must call the mortuary to contract their services and to authorize them to handle all legal matters of the burial on their behalf. The family must then sign papers which authorize the hospital or a similar institution to release the body to the mortuary. Even if this is done immediately, it may take a day or two for the body's release (and up to a week if the coroner was involved).

Preparing the deceased

Within the Muslim community certain individuals are specially trained to perform the "ghusl" on the dead body. However, it is a simple procedure and can be accomplished by any Muslim. In fact we are all en-

couraged to wash a dead body for it brings us closer to the reality of death.

Due to the time lapse between hospital and mortuary, the body can be preserved in cold storage and prepared a few hours before the funeral. The "ghusl" consists of several steps and carries its own specifications. For instance, a male washes a male and female washes a female. Also, the body must be wrapped in a clean, preferably white cloth in addition to being placed in a casket which is required by law in this country. For a more detailed discussion of this subject, the Muslim Student Association has prepared a pamphlet entitled, "Preparation of the Deceased and Janazah Prayers."

Janazah prayers

The *Janazah* prayer is an obligation on the Muslims, but if only a few participate, the duty is fulfilled. The prayer must be performed for most Muslims, including the tiniest infant who breathed only a few seconds. Joining in the *janazah* prayer and in the procession to the burial site is highly recommended as the rewards are great. The prayer can immediately precede the burial at the graveside or nearby or it can be performed before the funeral procession. The mortuary may also provide a room for praying. It is not customary for the prayer to be performed within a mosque according to some Hadith. It is interesting to note that in the format of the *Janazah* prayer, the Muslims remain standing as they face the wrapped body. It is forbidden to perform the prayer with prostration, as is usual in daily prayers, in order to avoid any sign of submission to the deceased whom they face as they pray. In addition, once the body is buried, we are forbidden to prostrate before the grave. The Prophet once said: "Some communities before you had converted the graves of their prophets into objects of worship. You must not do so. Beware, I have warned you".³

At the graveside

Before burying the deceased, those present are encouraged to make *du'ā'* (supplication) for him. Following the *du'ā'*, those present are each encouraged to place a few handfuls of dirt over the casket which is within the grave awaiting burial. In this country a machine usually completes the burial process. It is not necessary to remain for this though some prefer to stay until the very end.

The Burial

The burial should take place as early as possible, as soon as perhaps the second day. Most mortuaries and cemeteries do not bury the dead on Sundays or holidays, and Saturday burials are possible but cost more. The family must consult the cemetery to arrange the date and time of the funeral. Upon confirmation, they must inform the mortuary and the

Islamic center, if necessary.

The cemetery should also be informed of certain Islamic rulings regarding the burial. For instance, the grave should be dug so that it faces the "qiblah." The family as well should know that the slab of stone, though it is not recommended at all, should be simple and should not be inscribed with any Qur'anic verses, as people may step on the grave.

Traditions associated with death

The mourning period in Islam is limited to three days according to the Sunnah of the Prophet. All visiting should take place during this time (there is flexibility according to circumstances). The point is not to prolong the period where in an individual or family is totally consumed with their grief and remembrance of the dead. The wife of the deceased, though, must remain in "iddah" for four months, not only to show respect for her husband, but in case she is pregnant, this period will avoid problems of paternity if she plans to marry right away. Once this period is completed, she may be approached with proposals of marriage if she so wishes.

Many families traditionally offer a dinner or lunch at some point in commemoration of the death. This is not necessarily an Islamic custom, but is not disallowed. The holding of gatherings every 40 days or every year, as practiced by many, however, is not recommended and is not based on Islamic sources.

Some families gather on the occasion of a death simply to commemorate someone's passing and to read Qur'an. There is much blessing in this, but it should be understood that the blessings are for the living and not for the dead. So those present should listen attentively and seek the mercy of Allāh.

The wearing of black is also a custom whose origin is not in Islam as there is no indication in Islamic literature that Muslims should change the color of their dress on such an occasion. In fact, the color more closely associated with death is the white of the shroud, signifying, as in "hajj", our simplicity and purity as servants of Allāh. Actually, the custom of wearing black dates back to the Roman era. According to the World Book Encyclopedia. "The Romans introduced their funeral customs into England when they invaded that country in A.D. 43. The early Britons adopted some of these customs such as wearing black, walking in procession and raising a mound over a grave. They later became American funeral customs." Just how the tradition became common in parts of the Muslim world is somewhat unclear.

Wailing or excessive emotional displays should also not be part of the funeral ritual. Wailing is a custom completely unacceptable to the spirit and climate of a funeral. It is recommended that those who cannot control their intense emotions and weak state should very simply not attend.

As with every blessed and momentous event, the

ritual for the dead must too be carried out with the same intensity of feeling and devotion to Allāh. Death, after all, is really a part of life.

References

1. Glorious Qur'ān, Chapter 2, Verse 156.

2. Glorious Qur'ān Chapter 2, Verse 180.

3. Saḥīḥ Muslim, Translated by 'Abdul Ḥamid Ṣidiqī, Sh. Moḥammad Ashraf Publisher, Lahore, Pakistan, Book of Ṣalāt Vol 1, Chapter 197, p 269, No 1083.