

PREVENTIVE HEALTHCARE AND RELIGIOUS RITES OF BURIAL DURING PANDEMIC: A COMPARISON BETWEEN JEWISH AND ISLAMIC RITUALS

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ABSTRACT

Many funeral guidance and regulations were imposed during Covid-19 restriction movement to control the risk of Corona spreading, such as maintaining the social distance and in/outdoor safe gathering. Due to the high risk of the contagion, some religious rites were avoided like the gathering of many comforters, take the farewell look at the deceased and almost cancelling the decrees of religious burying and grief, which are spiritual potion for those who lost their loved ones. Since both Judaism and Islam forbid cremation, the burial rites should be strictly monitored and the decision of holding a modified mourning tributes for the deceased must be taken cautiously and in cooperation with the competent medical authority. But how does the new funeral regulation coincide with religious values? And how Jewish and Islamic traditions about washing the infected deceased's body, burial shroud, coffin, cemetery, initial mourning period and other customs could be preventive healthcare instructions? This article is attempting to answer these questions in the light of the Biblical and Quranic teachings.

Keywords funeral, interment, Jewish, Islamic, Covid-19, preventive, rituals.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Jewish health system took shape alongside with the legal and judicial system, and the historical political circumstances that Jewish communities in diaspora had undergone contributed to the development of a strict health system. The Jewish fight for protecting their own religion, language and culture imposed a state of solitude, however, the closed ghettos

improved a sanitary rule based on the last three books of Torah. The Jewish communities were known for their strong incitement to hygiene, the constant eating of lunch at home, carefully observing the method of slaughtering animals, Quarantine for people with infectious diseases, isolating of people with serious diseases such as lepers outside of the gathering centers, developing a complicated rituals of tidiness and avoid mingling with different cultural environment. Indeed, all these commitments have greatly contributed to reduce the incidence of pathological infections to a lowest possible level and, most probably, the reluctance of some conservative Jewish circles today to receive doses of the vaccine against Covid 19 was based on historical perceptions of the immune system in the Jewish jurisprudence and its practical applications. We can affirm without equivocation that the health system in Jewish jurisprudence developed under political and cultural influences, but it advanced scientifically, gradually, comprehensively and preserved its purity largely from the influence of the traditional Greek medicine. On the other hand, The Islamic health system was based on prophetic and less Quranic directives, but after the huge translation project of the Greek heritage into Arabic language by Syriac scholars in the golden reign of Abbasid Caliphs, the main reference for this system became the teachings of Galen and Hippocrates the wise.

2. JEWISH INTERMENT TRADITIONS AND TAHARA (RITUALLY PURE)

In their book “Death in Jewish Life: Burial and Mourning Customs Among Jews of Europe and Nearby Communities”, Joseph Isaac Lifshits highlighted some special prayers composed in 11th century for Jewish martyrs that called “Av ha-rahamim – Father of Mercy” (Stefan C. 2014. P. 142).. However, this new custom is not related to infected deceased burial, but it shows some similarities between Jews and Muslims in paying extra attention to the martyrs’ burial which is a cardinal point in this article. Eric Meyers highlighted the Jewish attention to burial practices because they thought all Israelites must be buried in Palestine, therefore, Jacob’s and Joseph’s bones had to be brought from Egypt to Palestine (to be gathered to one’s fathers) (Eric M. 1971. P. 96-97). Indeed, that overrated interest of burial should accompanied by careful rituals of *Tahara*.

2- Islamic Burial Customs and *Tahara* “The burial of the deceased is a collective obligation (farḍ kifāyah) on the Muslim community. This means that the entire Muslim community will be guilty if a Muslim body is not buried unless this was beyond their knowledge or capacity” (Al-Dawoody Ahmad. 2017. P. 759-784). “Burial Islam has a unique style of building graves and cemeteries that is characterized by humility, simplicity, and economy in costs and that avoids glorifying the dead with elaborate monuments. The deceased should be buried in the locality in which he lived/died. After the body is totally covered, it is desirable to fill the grave with soil” (Ekpo. 2016. P.58-63)

3. RELIGIONS AND CHALLENGES OF COVID-19

In religions historical experience, curfew, quarantine, and movement restriction were not unique steps to impose and follow, however, the international adaption of these steps made a wrong impression about it and presented it as brand new. In the book of Leviticus, we clearly perceive a strict campaign to impose a ban on lepers to keep them away from public gatherings and not accepting them in the community only after strict assurance that they and their cloths are free from any possible traces of leprosy.

Cremation could be one of Corona challenges, since Judaism and Islam forbid the necessity of cremation to eliminate all traces of disease. Some communities among Jews and Muslims refused wearing masks, continued their religious events and celebrated in huge gathering for Jum'ah prayer or Mikvahs (pools used for ritual immersions), even they spread disease.

Funerary rites in the framework of Islamic legal duties are considered as a “collective obligation” (Fardh Kifayah) which falls in the second degree of the Islamic legal obligation hierarchy. This kifaya-doctrine holds leniency in obligatory performance a little more than the first degree which is widely recognized as “individual obligations” (fardh ‘ayn) which “follow a simple pattern: one person is assigned responsibility for performing a particular act and is solely held responsible if they fail to do so.” (Zulfiqar. A. 2018) Kifaya (Collective obligation), however, involves “shared responsibility for required acts”. (Zulfiqar. A. 2018) “With collective duties there is no concern over who performs, only that performance should result in the duty being fulfilled. If performance is completed, then the duty is suspended for everyone else.” (Wahba. 1986. P.60), (Zulfiqar. A. 2018) “The duties in this category are considered fardh kifāya and are not designated for any one person to perform. If some people, specifically scholars, perform the duty then the rest of the community (ummah) is no longer liable.” (Zulfiqar. A. 2018)

4. BIBLICAL AND ISLAMIC RULES OF WASHING DECEASED

For personal hygiene and self-monitor, chapter of Numbers had required some strict procedures of washing dead people whether they have contagious disease or not. For instance: “He that touches the dead body of any man shall be unclean seven days. He shall purify himself with it on the third day, and on the seventh day he shall be clean; but if he purifies not himself the third day, then the seventh day he shall not be clean” [Numbers: 11-12]. For Covid-19, the self-monitor is advised to be fourteen days if the patient or deceased who was touched is severely infected. In fact, the two times of purification mentioned before refers to washing the body completely not just washing the hands.

Islamic Sharia is based on honoring a person alive and dead, and among the manifestations of honoring a dead person is his washing and shrouding, his funeral, burial, and prayer for him. The ritual of washing corpse is one of the most important components of the funerary rites in

the Muslim society. Muslim scholars agreed upon that washing corpse is farḍ kifāya. (Al-Qazir. 2002. P.176) The Prophet said, "Wash the deceased with water and sidr and shroud him in two pieces of cloth". (Sahih al-Bukhari. 1849) He also said, "He who washes a dead body and conceals what he notices of physical defects, he will be forgiven forty times." (Riyad as-Salihin. Hadith 35) The reason behind this obligation is purification (taharah) of the dead body because, according to Islam, the death makes it impure. (Qasim Bin Abdallah. 2004. P.44) "The body is washed an odd number of times (perhaps three, five, or seven), and the water for ablution might be mixed with perfume, herbs, rose water, lotus, or camphor. The corpse's nose, ears, and neck are cleaned twice repeating the washing of the right forearm and hand and following the same procedure for the left one. The feet always come last. After the final washing, the body is dried and cotton plugs are placed in the body orifices. The Hanabalite book of Islamic law (sharia) describes washing of the dead as an act of pious devotion, earning the washer (mughassil) merit points (quirat) toward a better afterlife when his or her own death arrives." (Greenberg. D.2007)

However, in a special circumstance, some scholars see it allowed. For example, Grand Mufti of Egypt Shawki Allam issued Fatwa 3246 on 14 May 2015 "permitting the cremation of the dead bodies of Ebola victims and then burying them in graves after that if cremation is the correct method to stop the spread of the disease." (al-Dawody. 2017. P.759-784)

5. BIBLICAL INSTRUCTIONS FOR INFECTED DECEASED INTERMENT

Cemetery is a sacred place in Jewish traditions, therefore, eating, drinking and improper manner should be avoided within the graveyard boundaries (Rohatynjewishheritage.org) Those initial guidelines play an important role in dealing with burial and Covid-19.

The biblical teachings for infected deceased burial are based on Its procedures in dealing with leper, alive and dead. Leprosy, which is caused by a bacterium attacking the nervous system, was a terrifying pandemic and people believed it's incurable, and the term leprosy was mentioned 55 times in Old Testament, which described it as skin infection. Matching the biblical description of leprosy to the modern medical description is irrelevant and insignificant, as long as the point is about preventing an infectious disease. According to the biblical instruction the burial should take place as soon as possible after the death even if the dead was an executed criminal! (Old Testament. Deuteronomy).

Given that the health system is overwhelming, (Dayrit MM et al. 2018) assert, "frontline health care workers (frontliners) are faced with unimaginable risks of getting infected. Every doctor, nurse, medical technologist, radiation technologist, nursing assistant, hospital janitor and security guard will inevitably face the risk of COVID-19 infection." (Dy, L. F., & Rabajante, J. F. 2020) Mounting reports of infections and illness among health workers show that the COVID-19 has exposed health workers and their families to unprecedented levels of risk.

Although not representative, data from many countries across WHO regions indicate that “COVID-19 infections among health workers are far greater than those in the general population. Around 14% of COVID-19 cases reported to WHO are among health workers. In some countries, the proportion can be as high as 35%.” Thousands of health workers infected with COVID-19 have lost their lives worldwide. In addition to physical risks, “the pandemic has placed extraordinary levels of psychological stress on health workers exposed to high-demand settings for long hours, living in constant fear of disease exposure while separated from family and facing social stigmatization. Another study suggests that front-line health-care workers could account for 10–20% of all diagnoses.” (Nguyen. Long. 2002. P.475-483) One of the reasons was long-time exposure to large numbers of infected patients. (Wang.J. 2020)

Since a close contact poses high risk of infection, Muslim scholars suggest minimizing funeral procedures, including washing corpse of a covid-19 patient. During an interview with the "Ma Al-Hakim" program, which was broadcasted on Al-Jazeera TV channel, Bashi warned that workers who routinely deal with corpses may be at risk of contracting epidemics, and the number of pathways for transmission of tuberculosis, blood-borne viruses, and gastrointestinal infections. He recommended that information on these risks should be provided to both emergency workers and the general public to ensure proper disposal of dead bodies even without washing, appropriate precautions when handling dead bodies . From the perspective of Islamic law, the Secretary-General of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, Ali Al-Qurradaghi explained that the shrouding in the white robe is Sunnah, and that the basic principle is to cover the body of the deceased, stressing that the abandonment of washing and shrouding is here for necessity and presenting the purpose of the human soul over other purposes. As long as there is a possibility that the washers will be infected with the epidemic, he said, "Here we do not recommend washing the dead, and it is sufficient to pray for them". In short, there is no legal objection to praying for these corona dead without washing them, if there is a possibility - which is a strong and existing hypothesis - for the infection to spread to these washers (aljazeera.net/news/ , retrieved on Sunday 5 April 2020 16:13,). He provided evidence on his opinion saying that the Prophet of Islam Muhammad, peace be upon him, considered the dead of a plague as a martyr. He added, "Since the Corona epidemic is a plague or similar to the plague, everyone who dies with it could be called a martyr, and it is permissible to treat the martyrs in terms of not washing and shrouding in the usual way, but prayers must be made over him. (aljazeera.net/news/ , retrieved on Sunday 5 April 2020 16:13) His statement was echoed in the saying of the Prophet, may peace be upon him, he said: “He commanded the dead ones to be buried in their clothes, and they were not washed, and he did not pray on them”. Likewise, he is not shrouded or prayed over, but is buried in his clothes (worn during his death). [Sahih Al-Bukhari No. 1343]. Furthermore, Muslim scholars permitted to bury more than one martyr together in one grave. (al-Kasani. 2/63)

The biblical steps of dealing with leprosy:

Leper must stay out of the gathering (tent) for seven days.

On the seventh day leper must shave his head, beards eyebrows and the rest of their hair.

Lepers must wash their cloth and bathe themselves. The rituals that follow are spiritual and concerned with soul purification and the necessity of submission to the Creator.

5. CONCLUSION

According to Islamic law Corona epidemic is a plague or like the plague, everyone who dies with it could be called a martyr, and it is permissible to treat the martyrs in terms of not washing and shrouding in the usual way, but prayers must be made over him; more than one of the dead infected people could be buried together in one grave. In Jewish law for personal hygiene and self-monitor, chapter of Numbers had required some strict procedures of washing dead people whether they have contagious disease or not. Indeed, all these commitments have greatly contributed to reducing the incidence of pathological infections to the lowest possible level.

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