October, the crisis team was called by the staff of an after-school centre commonly known as The Red House. The staff wanted help to deal with a crisis situation. The house officer and psychologist made a visit to The Red House and found the staff—a group of approximately six people — in great distress.

A 12-year old boy, Max, who had been attending the centre during after-school hours since first grade, was dead. The family came from eastern Europe, and there was a younger sister. As the parents worked long hours Max spent much time at the Red House and was almost one of the staff. He was very well liked and popular with his peers too. He was an acknowledged leader of an activity group run by the centre on Wednesday night called *Club Midweek*. The day before (a Sunday) Max had been playing with a friend in a large birch tree in the grounds of The Red House. The boys agreed to frighten one of their friends. Max was to hang in a rope in the tree, looking like a corpse while the other boy called their friend. When the two boys came back Max was hanging dead in his rope. The boys fled at first but soon consulted an adult. Very soon there was a big crowd at the site and the police took charge. The police had to wait about two hours for a technical expert and let the body hang in the tree all that time. Max's mother was called and she, according to the custom in the village where she was born, threw herself on the ground and wailed out her grief. The onlookers were shocked and angry at the police.

When the crisis team members came to The Red House, only the staff were there. The children had been in a numbed state and the staff were unable to take care of them. The staff members asked the same questions over and over again. Can we go on with *Club Midweek*? This week? Ever? Will the children be more hurt by talking about Max's death or should we talk through this matter with them? The team listened and talked through the situation. Next day the staff of The Red House called for a new consultation. The children were by now crying a lot and some of them had anxiety spells and the staff felt inadequate. The staff felt good about yesterday's visit. I went there with the house officer. The story was told again and the situation among the staff was much the same as the day before. The children had been telling the staff that Max was not dead. He was coming back on Thursday . . . Many children were unable to sleep and their anxiety level was high. Max's body had been shipped abroad by the parents to their home country.

I now gave the following instructions, which were accepted by the staff, who now found something they could do:

Club Midweek will meet as usual, but in a larger room. Admit guests who want to come. Everyone is to bring a candle. Light the candles together and share your memories of Max. Give crayons and paper to everybody and ask them to write down or draw something to express their memories of Max. Collect the sheets of paper and give them to the bereaved family as a last greeting from the friends of Max.

The staff of The Red House did all this very beautifully. On Friday I was told that the ceremony had been attended by some 40 children and 15 parents. The meeting had been very moving. In the beginning people cried a lot when the candles were lit. Everybody had participated in the drawing ritual. Max's family had been surprised and moved by the gift.

The rumours of Max's return were gone, the children slept well and nobody showed signs of anxiety.

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JEWISH MOURNING PRACTICES

Do They Help? by HAZEL STERNBERG

Is it true that Jewish people can expect incomparable help and support from their own community at a time of bereavement? Or is this a widely-held myth? Lady Sternberg, a bereavement counsellor, shows **Bereavement Care** readers where she thinks there can be real help, either from the traditional ritual or from the support of the local Jewish community, and where Jewish bereaved people can be as isolated and ambivalent as anyone else.

The first mention of mourning practices among the Israelites can be found in the very early poetic and narrative books of the Bible. Many of the customs there mentioned were down the centuries gradually codified by the Rabbis, with social and ethical justifications, in the large compilation of Jewish law and thought known as the **Talmud.** Orthodox Jewish practice about the burial of the dead and the treatment of mourners by society, as well as the protocol of behaviour enjoined on mourners themselves, has not changed much since medieval times.

In Genesis we read that Reuben tears his garment when he hears that Joseph is missing, and so does Jacob when he sees the blood-stained cloak. Again, Job, on hearing of the death of his children, and also his friends follow suit as an act of commiseration. All this deliberate destruction of what must have been articles of great value to the owners may have been an obvious outlet for pent-up emotions.

Almost as frequent are references to the wearing of sackcloth. In Micah we hear of a mourner going naked. There are many references to the putting of dust on the head, and this practice continued down to historical times. Dishevelment and taking off of turbans are often mentioned, and there are many references to shaving the head, completely or in tonsure, and the removal of beards. But the opposite custom, that of refraining from shaving and cutting the hair, has in fact prevailed in our time. The principle is the same: a mourner does the opposite of normal custom in order to show his change of status.

Moving to the present day, let me briefly explain the protocol to be observed by the child, parent or sibling of the dead. All, whether male or female, will tear their lapels at the funeral service and the nearest male relative will recite the **Kaddish,** or prayer for the dead. This is a short and moving prayer,

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familiar to Christians, about the transitoriness of life and the inevitability of loss. A man will be under the obligation to recite this prayer, in company with others at the synagogue morning service, of which it is an integral part. For the first week, however, he is exempted from going to the synagogue and from all household and business chores, and the community has a duty to see to it that at least 10 men (which is the minimum required for a valid Jewish prayer service) attend his home every morning and evening, so that he can perform his religious duty. That is the basis for the **Shiva,** seven days mourning period. The word means literally seven. All other mourners in chief are expected to gether at the house, and allow themselves to be attended by their friends and neighbours who bring food and generally relieve them of the normal duties towards the visitors, who are expected to come in large numbers as soon as the funeral has taken place.

Jewish funerals usually take place within 24 hours of death, following traditional practices in hotter climates, and are conducted with great simplicity. The equality of all is affirmed: there are no flowers, and there is a standard coffin. Cremation is increasingly popular among non-practising Jews, but traditionally, and among committed synagogue members of every kind, it is thought to be an undignified way of disposing of a body. Among the very orthodox Jews women are discouraged from going to the cemetery, to spare them trauma, but I notice that some are now asserting their need to take part. I do not know whether this is because they feel it might be a helpful experience for themselves. Their presence at the **Hesped,** the saying of some good things about the deceased, which takes place outside the home or in the synagogue, and the subsequent following of the cortege for a few yards down the street, is quite accepted. But following the rule that women have no public role to play in worship they are not asked to go to synagogue every day to say the **Kaddish.**

The **Talmud** sages worked out the phrasing of early grief during the first centuries of our era. There should be three days of weeping, followed by four days of eulogy. This was intended to help mourners avoid too much self-accusation and to think positively. In fact, this remains an ideal, and Jews are just as confused and ambivalent as others. But this duty, enjoined on everyone in the community, to show your face and overcome whatever embarrassment, past ill-feeling or inadequacies, can help individuals to feel part of a caring group, and to get a new perspective on their own life and on that of the lost member.

Undoubtedly, many Jews continue to pay their annual synagogue dues because they know that this guarantees them a Jewish burial in a Jewish cemetery and all the attendant services. As it is thought to be a primary good deed, or **Mitzva,** to care for the dead, there will be groups of volunteers of women to wash and lay out the dead, and men to watch over them before burial. This is a source of great comfort, even to those who are not very zealous in their synagogue attendance.



At the end of the year's mourning, during which time very orthodox Jews will not hear music or go to a place of entertainment, the day will be marked by the burning in the home of a 24-hour candle, which will then mark every subsequent anniversary. There is one further ceremony which is not fixed to any particular time, and that is the laying of the tombstone. The stone will have a simple inscription in Hebrew and English and is normally rather standardised in shape and text. But this simple witnessing of the grave fills a useful function. Many will not have been able to go to the funeral because of the speed in which it was arranged. Therefore the stone setting is announced in the Jewish weekly paper and held on a Sunday so that as many friends as possible can come. Women come to this as a matter of course.

All the foregoing customs can be of support to those who are living a communal life and are known to others. Jewish social services have now to cope with the needs of many elderly people, isolated, and perhaps without children or other relatives, who are suddenly bereaved of the only other person who had any meaning for them. The loss of a partner often takes all meaning from their lives and it is particularly important, as we well know in Cruse, to offer to such people a sense of a caring community outside, even if they are not ready to join it. Efforts are made by some synagogues, especially the Reform ones, to reintroduce such people back into the social life and to offer them counselling as an interim measure. My own synagogue tries to get a volunteer to accompany the Rabbi to a **Shiva,** so that when all the well-meaning but probably unknown people have gone away at the end, that volunteer can get in touch, saying that in fact they have something more permanent to offer in the way of listening and trying to understand. The United Synagogue movement, to which the majority of "card-carrying" Jews belong, has in the last few years set up a counselling service.

To many Jews all these customs are alien and they can feel very hostile and ambivalent about doing the thing properly, not even being sure whether the deceased would have wanted it that way either. I have been to some funerals where the surviving partner of a marriage was not Jewish and that person can feel most distanced from the loved person, just at the time when they should be getting a feeling that it has to be. Of course this does only happen where there have been many unresolved marital and family feelings, and is not to do with the unfamiliar rituals as such.

People outside the Jewish community fantasise about how splendidly Jews look after their own but in fact there is no such thing as an all-embracing Jewish community. Rituals which take their meaning and force from a religious life cannot help those who do not participate in it. The **Shiva** is not a therapeutic institution but a religious one.

I have been to many families at the time of **Shiva,** often to people I did not know very well, and I never fail to be touched by the way people drop whatever they are doing to be there. It postpones by a week that inevitable stage of being alone with one's depleted self, with all the change and challenge that implies. But there is no magic Jewish protocol to deal with it eventually.