

The Blessings of Sephardic Mourning Rituals

Lauren Mehrara

My grandfather, David Mehrara, died this past January, surrounded by his children, grandchildren, and loving wife, my grandmother Jila. On the day he passed, I'd never felt closer to my family as we sat squished together on my grandmother's tiny couch, pouring over photo albums from every decade of my grandfather's life. In those moments, I hadn't realized the outpouring of love and feelings of strength that my family would soon derive from gatherings and traditions predicated by our Sephardic Jewish faith. Having never previously mourned someone according to the traditional stipulations of Sephardic grieving rituals, I was in awe of the tactfulness of every event we held that week at the synagogue, graveyard, and in my grandmother's home. I would like to explain the history behind four traditions that stood out to me as particularly meaningful: the inclusion of flowers at a funeral, the burial performed by family members and friends of the deceased, multiple nights of *Shiva* at the fam-

ily home, and lastly, a memorial service at the end of the week of mourning.

For context, there are two main subcultures within Judaism: Sephardim and Ashkenazim. Sephardic Jews are largely descended from Spain, North Africa, Portugal, and the Middle East, while Ashkenazi Jews are descended from France, Germany, and Eastern Europe. As a result of their geographical differences, Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews have different cultures and traditions; Sephardic grieving rituals, for example, vary greatly from the more prominent traditions of Ashkenazim.

During the burial, loved ones are invited to toss dirt upon the casket and bury the deceased themselves.¹ While performing this act, one is not supposed to hand off the shovel, but instead gently lay it down for the following person to pick up. This tradition is meaningful, as it allows mourners to exhaust and experience some tangible pains of their grief, while performing what is considered to be one of the

biggest *mitzvot*—or good deeds—in Judaism: burying the dead.² Since the dead are incapable of paying back or rewarding those who perform their burial, it is an act of pure honor and respect. It is one of the few times in an individual's life that they perform an act for another person without an expectation of reciprocity.

Another Sephardic tradition performed at the burial of a loved one is called *Kriah*, meaning the tearing of one's garment over their heart.³ Per tradition, the immediate family members are meant to wear this same garment for the seven days of *Shiva* as a visible manifestation of their grief. As they tear the clothing, the mourners recite the following blessing: "Blessed are You, Adonai Our God, Ruler of the Universe, the True Judge." In doing so, their heart and pain is exposed to the world for the first week after burying their loved one.

While the majority of Jewish funerals partake in the tradition of *Shiva*, where loved ones gather and eat at the family home of the

deceased for the week after the funeral, a uniquely Iranian tradition is the hosting of a rabbinical study session called *Tarihim*. The purpose of this session is to provide family members with a biblical form of counseling, as a Rabbi gathers the immediate family and delivers a eulogy of their loved one with the teachings of the Torah reading for that week.⁴ This session is designed to comfort the family with the memory of their loved one, while also explaining, according to the Jewish tradition and the Torah's teachings, how they can continue to live their life and honor the dead. During my family's session of *Tarihim*, as my cousins, aunts and uncles, and grandmother gathered, we were instructed to live our lives with the memory of my grandfather at the forefront of our minds, though not overshadowing joyous occasions with our grief. Since my relatives and I are at varying stages of life and scattered across the country, it was calming to be given the same

advice on how to move forward after losing my grandfather, who had been the one guiding us for so long.

After *Tarihim*, guests arrive and share a meal with the mourners, often telling stories of their time with the person who passed. During this part of the *Shiva*, generations of individuals shed their differences and simply embrace the comfort of others. The timing of the *Shiva* is also conducive to healing because it does not force the mourners to return to regular life immediately following the funeral. Instead, they are granted a home full of supportive neighbors and friends for the seven days after the burial.

In celebrating the life of my grandfather while also experiencing grief, I began to understand the value of religious mourning traditions. As a relatively non-observant household, my family was given a purpose by the traditions of our faith. During a time when we felt as though there was

no plan, our ancestral rituals guided us. By practicing these rituals and embracing the many individuals who showed up to express their love for my grandfather, we found purpose through the sadness of our loss. As such, I am grateful for the religiosity of our time of mourning and the feelings of love it fostered.

