

The Jewish Way of Death

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The entry into death is a deeply codified event among Orthodox Jews the world over. The ritual killing of animals for kosher eating and the passing of Jewish life are occasions for employing specific apparatus refined through centuries of folk custom, biblical commandment, and Talmudic instruction (Donin 1972:106-07, 296-99; Gansfried 1961:87-105). The following photographs depict two of the critical elements of the traditional Orthodox Jewish approach to animal and human death: the knives of the *shochet* (ritual slaughterer), and the all-wooden casket. Both reside in the Judaica Collection at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. (Grossman 1997:219-20).

The treatment of death in the Orthodox Jewish tradition, whether animal or human, is characterized by extreme cleanliness, speed, and precision. The practical, biological aspects of life's end—isolation, purification, and disposal—are mediated by strong edicts to honor the sanctity of the deceased, or in the case of animals, the predeceased.

Cows and chickens selected for consumption meet their end in the hands of the *shochet* who uses the large (cow), or small (chicken), square-ended rectangular knife in the photograph. These are stainless steel knives made in the mid-twentieth century by the renowned New York cutler and Russian immigrant Joseph Miller (1887-1972). They appear on a shop signboard along with instruments he made for a *mohel* (ritual circumcisionist). The Yiddish inscription translates: "Here are Miller's knives and circumcision tools, the best and finest in the world. Guaranteed never to rust."

Oral and written Jewish traditions stipulate: the length of the knife must be at least twice the diameter of the neck being slit; the knives must bear no nick, dent, or blemish; a benediction must be uttered each time they are used; and no direct pressure may be applied against the skin as the knife is passed quickly across its throat, which instantly severs the trachea, esophagus, vagus nerve, carotid artery, and jugular vein, bringing immediate death and a prompt drainage of blood. Quick, clean, and pious work are the *shochet's* hallmarks. The cow and the chicken should never know what happened (Karas 1991:40-55; Singer 1968:17-30).

The Orthodox Jew, on the other hand, should know precisely what's ahead after his or her departure—a simple wooden box. Embalming and

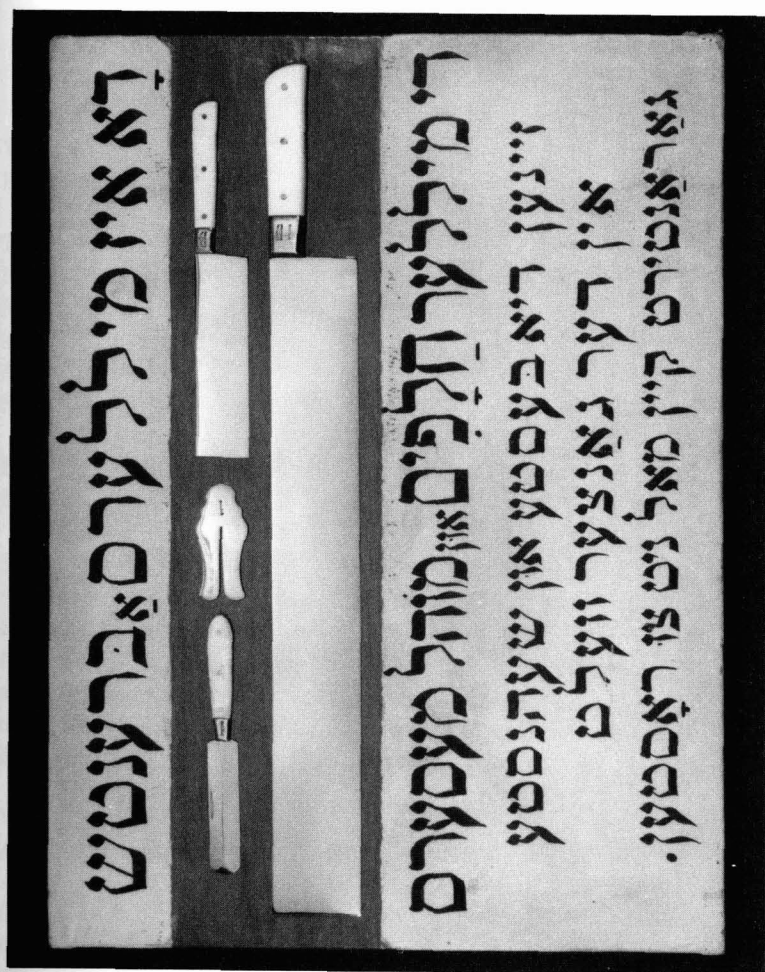
cremation are forbidden among the Orthodox, leaving prompt burial in the ground as the primary option. Traditionally, and in Israel today, no coffins are used, in fulfillment of the biblical reminder that we are of dust and unto dust we shall return as quickly as possible once death has occurred. A cotton or linen sheet holds the body until its dissolution into the surrounding soil (Iseron 1994:465-75).

With modern health codes, caskets now must enclose bodies and typically a concrete vault enclosing the casket keeps the cemetery lawn from sinking as the box decays. The casket itself thus becomes an abstracted vehicle of Jewish custom. The one in the photograph is for a child, built of unfinished poplar in 1991 by C. Stoler and Co. of Bristol, Tennessee. The company was founded in New York City in 1891 (*The Jewish Funeral Director* 1991:38).

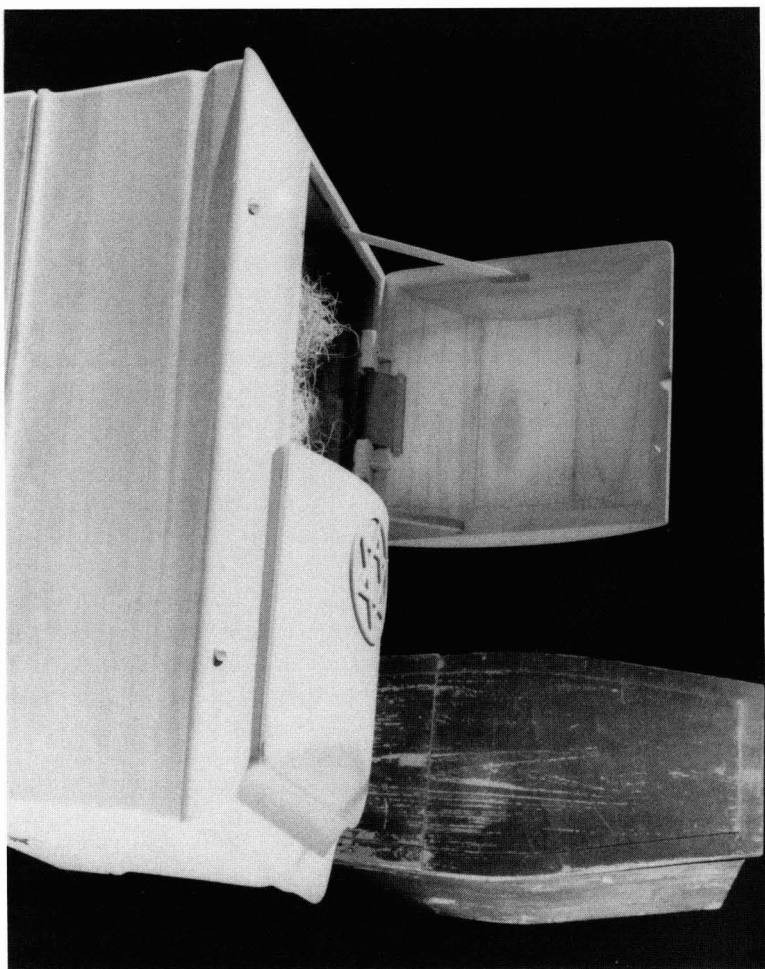
All framing, hinges, and fasteners are wooden, adhering to the belief that nothing remains behind and that all returns to earth. The interior is padded with excelsior, a finely shredded wood fiber. Here, the domed lid and the Star of David are departures from the Jewish tradition of a simple casket. A further departure, due probably to the tender age of the deceased, is the raised half-lid. The viewing of remains is considered disrespectful and not a part of the typical Jewish memorial service. Three large holes are drilled in the base of the casket, permitting the deceased to make direct contact with the earth (vault), and to accelerate the process of return symbolically (Wouk 1955:238-41). The act of returning to an original state is an abiding theme in the Orthodox Jewish approach toward life and death.

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Knife Shop Sign: 64 cm wide, 49 cm high, 6 cm thick. Cow knife (blade only): 40.5 cm long, 5.7 cm high, .02 cm thick. Chicken knife (blade only): 12.7 cm long, 3.2 cm high, .01 cm thick. National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution. Gift of Irene Galdston.



Jewish child's casket, poplar, 1991 (foreground); Nineteenth-century Christian pine casket (background). National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution. Gift of C. Stoler & Co.