

Rabbi Jeff Berger

Ritual Washing Before Burial: A Comparison

This paper looks closely at the process of *Tahara* (ritual washing of the dead before burial) practiced in the Jewish religion. It will also explore similarities and differences with ritual washing of other traditions, including the Islamic custom of *Ghusl*. And it will include a short section on the practicalities of performing the ritual during the recent Covid-19 pandemic.

Among the core tenets of Jewish belief is that all human beings are holy and were created in the 'Image of God'. Therefore, in life as in death, we are obliged to treat people with the utmost dignity and respect. The question of what happens to a person after death has been of great interest to all religions. In Judaism, when a person dies, their body which housed their *Neshamah* (soul), must be treated with the same respect as it was during their life. Jewish medical ethics, for the most part, prevents hastening death. Just as a new-born child is swaddled after birth, the *Met* (deceased) is washed and dressed as they are prepared for burial. The ritual process is called *Tahara* (purification).



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Rabbi Jeff Berger grew up in New York City, and lived for extended periods in Jerusalem and Tokyo, before moving to the United Kingdom in 2000. He holds university degrees in Business Administration and in Asian Studies.

After a career in commerce spanning 15 years and three continents, he was ordained at the Judith Lady Montefiore College in London in 2009. Currently, he serves the Wembley Sephardi Synagogue. He was appointed a Trustee of the climate advocacy charity, EcoJudaism, in 2021. Rabbi Jeff has been engaged in interfaith dialogue since 2013, was a KAICIID Fellow in 2016 and a 2021-22 GERIS Fellow. He is an invited speaker, columnist, and broadcaster.