We first look at the Islamic meaning of death and the dead, and then we see how these ideas express themselves in Turkey. It is common Muslim thinking that each individual’s life has dramatic significance as part of a great cosmic plan and divine history. Individuals come from a past in which they were created and are on their way to a future eternity. Life on earth is only one part of this long voyage.

Death

The Kur’an emphasizes the inescapable nature of death, and life after death, as part of the journey of every soul toward immortality. The two foundations of Islamic faith are Allah and immortality, or the hereafter, represented as Paradise and Hell. Just as life is Allah’s creation, so is death. Death is a dynamic of the moral life. It was created to test the believer’s morality, in the sense that it is an encouragement to live a moral life. What one does for good or evil in this life carries over into the hereafter. Graves and tombs are way stations for the transition to the eternal, to the next life.

On the Last Day, referred to as the Judgment Day, the Day of Reckoning, the Day of Questioning, the Day of Standing before Allah, the Day of Resurrection, or The Day of Gathering, on that day of days, the dead will rise and appear before Allah, together with every human being, grouped in their myriads behind their prophets, the messengers of Allah. And then each individual must answer for the good and the evil committed in life on earth. Allah will judge. Allah will either punish or reward. The belief is that the souls of the dead in their graves are awaiting this day of judgment. The righteous dead find their graves to be a garden of repose, while the souls of the wicked find their graves
to be pits of Hell. Those who are living are to help the dead by caring for their ultimate destination and remembering them by petitionary prayer and recitation from scripture, by deeds of charity, and by visiting the graves where the dead lie. These acts are due to the dead from those who are living. The dead have claims on the living.

When people are about to die, their bodies are placed on their right side, and their faces are turned in the direction of the mosque in Mecca. Those gathered around the dying urge them to say the testimony of faith, the shahada, as their last words: ‘There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.’ Relatives arrange for someone to be reciting from the Kur’an. The person ideally should die with the word ‘Allah’ or the words of the testimony on his or her lips, as this is proper preparation for the testing to come. After death, a cloth is tied under the chin and around the head to keep the mouth from opening. The eyes are closed.

It is a Muslim folk belief that it is a good sign to die on a sacred day or night, or at a sacred time, such as on a Friday, on the Night of Power and Destiny, or in the fasting month of Ramazan. Those dying at such times or in sacred places are thought to be well received by Allah.

**Preparation of the corpse**

The dead are buried as soon as possible, mostly within 24 hours. There are no ‘funeral homes’ as known in western countries. Close relatives or the local imam gives a final, full ablution, the washing of the entire body. The ablution is done at home or, if the person died at the hospital, in the morgue. If there is no one to care for the dead, the municipality will provide someone to wash the body. Men wash men, and women wash women, which shows a concern for the modesty of the dead.

For the ablution, the corpse is stripped of all clothing and placed on a clean, well-scented table. The private parts are covered, and the corpse is fully washed as for the canonical prayer sacrament. It is to be made pure and clean for the coming journey to eternity. Hot, perfumed water is used. Perfume should also be put on the head, on the beard of men, and on the face’s points of prostration, which are the forehead and nose. The body is then wrapped in two or three pieces of white cloth, the outer one of which is tied above the head and below the feet, forming something like a sack. There are further details about the washing and clothing of the corpse beyond what we have space to discuss here.

After being washed and wrapped, the corpse is placed in a wooden coffin for transportation to the mosque. The hearse that conveys the