

**A GUIDE TO JEWISH
MOURNING LAWS AND
PRACTICES**

Congregation Adat Reyim
West Springfield, Virginia



To everything there is a season, and a
time for every purpose under heaven

Ecclesiastes 3:1

Dear Friends:

At some point in our lives we may be faced with the loss of a loved one and have the responsibility for seeing that funeral arrangements are made in accordance with Jewish tradition. During this difficult time, as we deal with our grief, and in turn face our own mortality, we should recognize that we have the strength to endure our loss and continue on with our lives.

Jewish tradition helps us confront our grief. It offers us a way to mourn, and it teaches us how to comfort those who are grieving.

The purpose of this pamphlet is to help you prepare for what can be a painful and difficult time, and to give you a better understanding of the Jewish approach to death and mourning, which is based on two principles:

Kavod Hamet - honoring and respecting the deceased, and

Nichum Avelim - consoling the mourners.

Tradition can serve us well. To this end we offer you this guidance. Please retain this brochure for future reference.

Sincerely,

Rabbi Bruce Aft

Arranging A Funeral

Contact a funeral home that is familiar with and experienced in Jewish funeral practices. Many are listed in the appendix. Ideally, you should make arrangements in advance with the director of the funeral home of selected by the family.

Who should be notified? - If possible, in advance of the death make a list of key people and phone numbers.

Last Wishes - Is there a letter of instructions from the deceased? Which funeral home to use? Where should shiva be? Where is the will? Where should the burial be? What was the favorite charity of the deceased? These are difficult decisions to make at any time. However, they become much more difficult after a death.

The funeral home will coordinate arrangements with the clergy, the synagogue staff and the cemetery. The funeral home will be in touch with the Rabbi who will then contact you. However, it is also a good idea for you to contact the Rabbi if you do not hear from him within a couple of hours, to make sure that the funeral home has called him. If the Rabbi is not available, call the president of the synagogue.

The funeral home will arrange the funeral even if it is to take place out of town. They will also make the necessary arrangements in the event the body needs to be returned to our area from somewhere else.

If you do not have a burial plot, the funeral director can arrange for you to purchase one.

The synagogue encourages you to deal directly with a funeral home experienced with Jewish practices and directly with a cemetery. If you are not able to do so, and you need help, please call the Rabbi, a loved one, or a trusted friend.

Organ Donations

Organ transplants have become an accepted way among Jews to save lives and alleviate human suffering. There is a consensus among Conservative Jews that organ transplants are not only permissible, but strongly encouraged according to Jewish laws, and donations are meritorious acts of chesed, true loving kindness.

Preparations for Burial

Traditional Jewish burial requires simplicity in all funeral arrangements. For interfaith marriages, arrangements are more complicated, so please discuss with the Rabbi in advance of the death of either spouse.

The deceased person's body is always treated with the utmost respect and sanctity. Traditionally, a ritual cleansing, tahara, is performed. If this is desired, the funeral home will make the arrangements.

Many observant Jews believe that the body should never be left unattended. We encourage you to follow this tradition. Family members may act as shomrim, or the funeral home can appoint a shomer, someone to watch over the deceased until the burial is completed. One of the more comforting aspects of serving as a shomer is to read psalms (Tehillim) while sitting with the deceased.

Embalming and autopsies are usually forbidden as they are seen as desecrations of the body. However, there are certain circumstances when Jewish Law permits autopsies. Please contact the Rabbi for additional information.

The casket should be a simple wooden coffin, a symbol that rich and poor alike are equal before God. Some cemeteries, like Arlington Cemetery require vaults or liners for all burials. Some states, like Virginia, require them. It is customary that the deceased be buried in a shroud or tachrichim, a simple white linen garment supplied by the funeral home.

The Funeral

Out of respect for the deceased, the funeral should take place as soon as possible after death.

However, funerals may not take place on the Sabbath, on the first, second and last days of festivals nor on the High Holy Days. If relatives are out-of-town, or if the Rabbi cannot make it, the funeral may be postponed for a day or two. The funeral service may be conducted at a funeral chapel or at the grave site. Have a friend or relative guard your house for security purposes.

The service, which is simple and dignified, may include psalms, inspirational readings and a eulogy highlighting the qualities of the deceased. Flowers are not customary at Jewish funerals. Family members are encouraged, either to speak about their loved one, or to write something to be read by the Rabbi.

There are special limits for Cohanim and Leviim who participate. Ask the people you want to serve as pallbearers if they are a Cohen or Levi. If they are, please discuss this with the Rabbi.

It is a mitzvah to be a pallbearer. Generally six to eight pallbearers are appointed to lift the coffin into the hearse at the funeral home, and to carry it to the grave from the hearse. Honorary pallbearers may also be designated.

Kriah, *the ritual tearing of a garment*, is observed by the immediate relatives of the deceased: father, mother, brother, sister, son, daughter, half-brother or sister, and spouse. The

prevailing custom is for the mourner to pin a black ribbon to his or her garment and tear the ribbon. The tear should be worn visibly during shiva. You do not need to wear the ribbon openly after shiva, and the ribbon or torn clothing is never worn on Shabbat or holidays. Those in mourning for parents wear the ribbon on the left or make a tear on the left side of the garment, which is close to the heart. The ribbon or tear should be plainly visible. Those in mourning for other relatives wear the ribbon on the right or make a tear on the right side of the garment.

The Burial Ritual at the Cemetery

Many families place some earth on the coffin as a symbolic gesture and a way of paying final respects to the deceased after the casket is lowered into the ground. As an alternative, the casket is completely covered with earth before the mourners leave the cemetery.

The burial service consists of recitation of psalms, Tziduk Ha Din, the chanting of El Malay Rachamim, the memorial prayer and the Kaddish.

There is *no prohibition against pregnant women attending a funeral* or being present at the cemetery.

Children at the Funeral

Instinctively, we want to protect our children from pain and suffering. However, since it is important that children recognize that death is a part of life, families are encouraged to include children in all parts of the funeral services and mourning rites. Children over the age of six can usually understand and gain insight from the funeral and burial, but if children do not wish to attend, they should not be forced to do so.

By the same token, a child who wishes to go should not be deprived of the opportunity. There is nothing that they will see or hear that will be as scary as they might imagine otherwise. A child under the age of 13 is not obligated to observe the mourning rites.

Shiva

When and Where?

The immediate relatives should sit shiva together in one place, traditionally the home of the deceased. Shiva begins immediately after internment and ends on the seventh day after the morning services. Today, many families observe only a three day period. Shabbat is included in the seven days of the shiva period; however, public mourning is suspended on Shabbat. If Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Pesach, Shavuot or Sukkot falls during the shiva period, shiva ends when the holiday begins since the spirit of joy that comes with a festival is not consistent with the sadness of bereavement. If burial falls during the intermediate days of a festival, shiva begins at sundown on the last day of the holiday.

Customs

Ritual purification - towels and a bowl of *water* are set out in front of the house of mourning so that those who were at the cemetery can wash their hands before entering the house. No prayer is said nor is there a particular procedure for the washing.

Memorial candle - kept lit in the shiva house during the shiva period. No prayer is recited as it is being lighted.

Mirrors - should be covered.

Mourners sit on low stools - to signify their lack of concern for personal comfort and refrain from wearing garments or jewelry that is luxurious, immodest or ostentatious. Many mourners wear slippers rather than outdoor foot wear.

Some funeral homes may provide *chairs and coat racks* upon request, and will deliver them to the house of mourning.

Food - friends and relatives take care of all meal arrangements during the week of shiva. If you need help in organizing this, please contact the chair of the Sisterhood. Traditionally, eggs and other round foods symbolizing the eternal cycle of life are eaten at the meal of consolation.

Memorial Services - held in the evenings at the shiva house, or they may be held at the synagogue. The synagogue will provide families with siddurim, and kipot, as well as a leader for all of the prayer services. We will also coordinate a full minyan of at least ten people, counting both women and men.

Conclusion of Shiva - customary to walk around the block to symbolically return to life.

Guidelines for Mourners During the Shiva Period

The shiva period is set aside as time for you and your family to grieve and to accept condolences.

As a mourner, you are prohibited from doing *business* or experiencing any kind of *entertainment or pleasure*. Let visitors know how you are feeling and what you need from them.

Do not apologize for being upset or *crying* and do not be concerned that you may upset others by expressing your feelings. Shiva is the time to reminisce and talk about the deceased.

Remember, visitors are there for you. *Do not see yourself as host or hostess*. It is not necessary to rise and greet visitors when they come to pay their respects.

Guidelines for Visitors to a House of Mourning

Purpose of a shiva call - to let the bereaved know that they are not alone in their suffering and sorrow. You are there to lend emotional support and to speak about their loved one.

Entering - When you enter a shiva house, *do not ring the bell or knock*. This is because a shiva house is open to the community.

The bereaved have the difficult task of facing death squarely and learning to accept their loss. When making a shiva call, visitors should not attempt to divert the mourners from their grief in an attempt to help them forget. *The bereaved want to remember, and so it is helpful if you talk about the deceased and the death*. Recall major events you shared with the deceased, or your relationship with them.

Greeting the mourners - If mourners rise to extend greetings to you, you should greet them, but *you should not initiate such greetings*. Just let them know you are there with them. It is perfectly acceptable for there to be moments of *silence* during a shiva visit. Your presence in the shiva house marks the beginning of consolation. It is normal and understandable to feel awkward and uncomfortable. Custom tells us to remain silent and allow the mourner to speak first. Lending a sympathetic ear is more important than making small talk. Refrain from saying the following: "You'll get over it"; "Time will heal"; "[Name of deceased] lived such a long life." Although these phrases are intended to be comforting, they are empty words to the newly bereaved.

Leaving - Upon leaving a house of mourning it is traditional to *recite the blessing*, HaMakom Yenachem Et'chem B'toch She'ar Aveilei Tziyon Vi' Yerushalayim, "May God comfort you among the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem."

Rituals of Mourning After Shiva

Sh'loshim - is the thirty-day period of mourning for all relatives other than children of the deceased. For sons and daughters of the deceased, the period extends to 12 months from the day of internment. Please consult the rabbi regarding what is permitted and prohibited during sh'loshim and the 12 months following.

Kaddish - Only sons and daughters are required to recite kaddish for a full eleven months. Others are not required to recite kaddish for this length of time. However, many do so because they find that reciting the kaddish brings comfort and consolation and reaffirms their faith in God.

Memorials

Yahrzeit is the *anniversary* of the death of the deceased. At sundown on the night of *yahrzeit*, a *candle* is lit in the home to burn for 24 hours in memory of the deceased. *No blessing is recited when lighting a yahrzeit candle.* Should *yahrzeit* fall on *yom tov* or *Shabbat*, the *yahrzeit* candle is lit before the *Shabbat* or *yom tov* candles. *Kaddish* is recited at services in the Synagogue on the evening of the *yahrzeit* and again at morning and afternoon services the following day. The Rabbi can direct you to locations with a daily minyan, or this can be done during the *Shabbat* preceding the date, or on weekday evening services.

If the family has dedicated a perpetual memorial, a plaque with the name of the deceased will be displayed in the Synagogue, and the name of the deceased will be read during services and published in the synagogue bulletin.

Yizkor

Yizkor is the memorial service honoring the deceased. It is recited beginning with the very first service following the burial and four times a year thereafter: on Yom Kippur, on Shemini Atzaret (the eighth day of Sukkot), on the eighth day of Pesach and on the second day of Shavuot.

The Unveiling Ceremony

Headstone - Jewish law requires that a grave be marked, but the type of marking and the headstone are not specified. We suggest that you consult with the Rabbi before finalizing the inscription. Inscriptions usually include the name of the deceased in Hebrew and/or English as well as the date of birth and the date of death. Many people add the Hebrew letters, Taf, Nun, Tzadik, Bet, Hey, which is an abbreviation for the phrase, T'hey Nishmatola Tzrura B'tzror Hechayim, "May [Name of deceased's] soul be bound up in the bond of life."

If you are not sure of the Hebrew spelling of the name, you can send a copy of the engraver's stencil to the Rabbi at the Synagogue for verification. The monument company will provide you with a copy of the stencil.

Scheduling - It is customary for the unveiling to take place approximately 12 months after the funeral as a way to mark the end of the formal mourning period for sons and daughters. However, it may take place any time after sh'loshim. Make sure that a monument and covering are in place before setting a date for the unveiling.

Ceremony - the formal dedication of the headstone. Traditionally, the ceremony includes a recitation of a few *psalms* and the chanting of the *El Malay Rachamim*. The *Mourners Kaddish* is recited if there are ten Jewish adults present.

Visiting the Cemetery

Although Jewish law does not dictate when one must visit the grave of the deceased, there are times when it is traditional and comforting to do so: on *yahrzeits*, on Fast Days and before the High Holidays.

Judaism discourages excessive grave visitation. Visits to the grave should not be made on the middle days of Pesach or Sukkot (Hol Hamoed) nor on Hanukkah.

Additional Reading

The following is a list of helpful books to use as a guide and to consult for further help and explanation.

The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning, Maurice Lamm.

Gates of Mitzvah, Simeon J. Maslin

A Guide to Life: Jewish Laws and Customs of Mourning, Tzvi Rabinowicz

Jewish Reflections On Death, Jack Reimer

Mourning and Mitzvah, A Guided Journal for Walking the Mourner's Path Through Grief to Healing, Anne Brener.

A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort, Dr. Ron Wolfson.

Jewish Reflections on Death, Jack Reimer.

A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice, Isaac Klein.

When A Loved One Has Died, Earl Grollman

When Bad Things Happen to Good People, Harold Kushner

Contacts

DC Hebrew Beneficial Association Bethesda 301-530-5721

Danzansky-Goldberg Mem. Chapels Rockville 301-340-1400

Edward Sagel Funeral Director
Rockville 301-217-9400

Hebrew Free Burial Society
Rockville 301-230-7294

Ives-Pearson Funeral Home
Falls Church 703-532-7959

King David Memorial Gardens
Falls Church 703-560-4400

Men's Chevra Kadisha of Washington
Silver Sprg 301-681-6366

Stein Hebrew Mem. Funeral Home Washington 202-726-4222

Women's Chevra Kadisha
Silver Sprg 301-585-2028

APPENDIX

Great essay on *Organ Donation* - "The Mitzvah of Organ Donation," Rabbi Joseph H. Prouser of Congregation B'nai Sholom in Newington, Connecticut. His responsum, "The Obligation to Preserve Life and the Question of Post-Mortem Organ Donation," originally written for his Congregation, has been adopted by the Conservative movement.

WEB LINKS

<http://www.jewishfunerals.com>

<http://www.goodgrief.org><http://judaism.miningco.com/msub35.htm>

<http://ezra.mts.jhu.edu/~rabiars/mourning.html>