

# A GUIDE TO JEWISH FUNERAL PRACTICES

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Each of us must inevitably face the reality of death, either the loss of a loved one or our own mortality. We all have to make difficult decisions and confront knotty issues that reflect our humanity and test our faith.

The Jewish traditions associated with death and mourning not only speak to the preciousness of life, but are intended to help us in a loving way when we are feeling weak, afraid, bereft, and vulnerable. These time-tested observances help to calm us and heal us, enabling us to make the necessary adjustments to separation and loss.

Our sages regarded life and each individual as endowed with unique holiness. Thus the body, which is the vessel containing life, is to be treated with great sanctity. Each observance associated with burial emphasizes a significant element of our faith as family, congregation, and community coalesce to help the individual mourner.

Judaism emphasizes dignity and simplicity. It avoids ostentation and disguise. It regards death as the great equalizer returning us to the bosom of the earth. Those things which interrupt the natural process or which deny the reality of death are to be avoided. From the moment that the arrangements are begun, through the preparation of the body by the chevra kadisha, to the burial itself and subsequent shiva, everything is to be attended to with kvod hamet, respect, dignity, and kindness.

When a member of a family dies, every member of the community is touched by the loss. It is through the traditions and the community that we gain solace and we ease our pain. This guide is intended to assist us so that we will know what to expect and what to do when we experience a loss.

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## When Death Occurs

Call the synagogue office 202.362.4433 and ask for Marcy Spiro.

- After business hours, on weekends, and secular holidays, the synagogue phone's recorded message indicates that you should call our answering service at 301.421.5271. You will leave a message with them and a staff member will return your call to assist.
- On Yom Tov and Shabbat, even though detailed funeral arrangements should not be made, a staff member will be available to speak with you and begin assisting you.
- Staff members are familiar with the procedures for making both local and out-of-town arrangements and will provide guidance about funeral homes.

# Where to Begin

The first questions to consider are:

- Who will handle the funeral arrangements?
- Where will the burial take place?

## Funeral

We can help you make arrangements using the two funeral homes that have agreed to money-saving, fixed price Jewish funeral packages: Sagel Bloomfield Danzansky Goldberg and Hines-Rinaldi Funeral Homes. Working with our staff, rabbis, and committed community members, we will assist you in making necessary decisions and facilitate the process. If requested, prior to the funeral, your loved one will be prepared for the casket by members of our *tahara* teams. In addition, friends, family and congregation volunteers, *shomrim*, may sit at the funeral home to “watch over” your loved one if you wish.

In the case of a prepaid funeral, or if you wish to use another funeral home, please contact the synagogue first so we can involve members of the clergy and be of assistance.

## Burial

Arrangements can be made for purchasing plots at the time of death; however, our staff is always available to discuss fees and pre-need planning when requested by members.

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## Funeral Homes

**Hines-Rinaldi Funeral Home**  
11800 New Hampshire Avenue  
Silver Spring, MD 20904  
301.622.2290

**Sagel Bloomfield Danzansky Goldberg**  
1091 Rockville Pike  
Rockville, MD 20852  
301.340.1400

**Torchinsky Hebrew Funeral Home**  
254 Carroll Street NW  
Washington, DC 20012  
202.541.1001

## Cemetery, Markers, Headstones & Footstones

**Fram Monument**  
*ask for the Jewish Funeral Practices of Greater Washington contract price for a discount*  
Niv Fisbein  
301.605.8081

**Tegeler Monument Company**  
410.944.0300

**Sagel Bloomfield Danzansky Goldberg**  
*Monuments and Memorization*  
Larry Shor  
301.217.1400  
larry@sagelbloomfield.com

## Cemeteries

**Adas Israel Cemetery**  
1400 Alabama Avenue SE  
Washington, DC 20032  
202.362.4433

**Judean Memorial Gardens (Adas Israel Section)**  
16225 Batchellors Forest Road (at Georgia Ave.)  
Olney, MD 20832  
301.384.1000

## Cemeteries (cont.)

**Garden of Remembrance (Adas Israel Section)**  
14321 Comus Road  
Clarksburg MD 20871  
301.428.3000

**King David Memorial Gardens**  
7482 Lee Highway  
Falls Church, VA 22042  
703.560.4400

**Menorah Gardens/Parklawn Memorial Park**  
12800 Viers Mill Road  
Rockville, MD 20853  
301.881.2151

**Mount Lebanon Cemetery**  
9500 Riggs Road  
Hyattsville, MD 20783  
301.434.4640

## From the Time of Death to the Funeral

### Who is a mourner?

Mourners are those who are immediately related to the deceased - mother, father, sister, brother, husband, wife and child. From the moment of death until the burial, each of the immediate relatives is considered an *onen*. The *onen* has no religious obligation except to attend to the practical necessities of arranging for the funeral. Once burial has occurred, the seven immediate relatives are considered mourners.

### What are the preparations for burial?

*Tahara* - Cleansing the body, *tahara*, is a mitzvah performed by the *chevra kadisha*, the Burial Society. *Tahara* is considered a ritual act of purification.

*Tachrichim* - After the body is cleansed and *tahara* has been performed, it is dressed in shrouds, *tachrichim*, made of white cotton or linen. For those who wish, a *tallit* with the fringes cut, to show that it will no longer be used, is draped over the body. Earth from Israel is sprinkled in the coffin as a way of connecting the deceased to the holy soil of Eretz Israel. Broken shards, symbolizing the fragility of life, are laid over the deceased's eyes.

*Shmira* - Tradition encourages, as an act of great respect, that a body not be left alone from the time of death until burial. This practice of sitting with the deceased, *shmira*, may be performed by family, friends, or members of the community.

*Aron* - The coffin, *aron*, like the shrouds, should be simple and unadorned. Reflecting the Jewish beliefs that we are all equal in the face of death, the *aron* is made entirely of wood, without ornate carving, nails, or metal decoration.

### How do we regard civil procedures related to death?

*Autopsies* - Tradition frowns on autopsies unless required by civil law or for immediate medical benefit. Questions about autopsies should be referred to the rabbis.

*Organ Donations* - In keeping with the mitzvah of saving a life, organ donations for immediate use are encouraged. Specific questions about organ donations should be referred to the rabbis.

*Embalming and Cremation* - Because of their pagan roots, both embalming and cremation are discouraged by Jewish law. Embalming is not required by civil law.

## Funeral Service & Burial

### When does the funeral take place?

The funeral and burial are held as soon as possible after death. Judaism considers prompt burial a matter of respect to the deceased. In addition, prolonging burial adds to the strain experienced by the bereaved. In special circumstances, for instance when family members are not immediately available to attend the funeral, postponement is acceptable.

### Where is the funeral service held?

Jewish funeral services, which are characterized by simplicity and brevity, may be conducted at a funeral chapel or at the gravesite. Members of the Congregation have the privilege of a funeral service at the synagogue.

# Funeral Service & Burial (cont.)

### What happens at the funeral service?

*Kriah* – Before the service begins, the mourners gather together with the rabbi to perform *kriah*, rending a garment. *Kriah* is an ancient tradition which can be traced to biblical times. The custom today is to cut a black ribbon which children of the deceased wear on the left side over the heart and other mourners wear on the right. During this ritual, mourners stand to signify strength at the time of grief, and they recite a prayer acknowledging the inevitability of death.

*Service* – The bereaved family is seated at the front of the synagogue or chapel. The closed coffin remains in view covered by a pall. Flowers, a symbol of life and celebration, are not customary. The service includes psalms and inspirational readings. The eulogy is intended to highlight the enduring qualities of the deceased. The service ends with the *Eyl Malei Rachamim* prayer, “God Full of Compassion,” which expresses the hope that the deceased will be granted eternal peace.

*Pallbearers* – At the end of the service, the coffin is moved from the synagogue or chapel to the hearse by pallbearers designated by the family. As a sign of respect, the coffin precedes the mourners. At least six pallbearers are required to lift the coffin into the hearse and to carry it to the grave at the cemetery. Honorary pallbearers may also be assigned. Mourners do not serve as pallbearers.

### Should children attend?

The presence of children at a funeral is ultimately a family decision. Recent work in psychology suggests that children may be more frightened by what they imagine occurs at funerals than what actually happens. Hence, from the age of 8 to 10 on, children should be permitted to attend.

### How do we regard viewing?

Jewish tradition discourages viewing the deceased. It considers opening a coffin prior to burial an intrusion of the deceased’s privacy and, therefore, disrespectful.

### What traditions are observed at burial?

The burial service is simple, consisting of a psalm, the chanting of the *Eyl Malei Rachamim* prayer and the recitation of the kaddish. Traditionally, the casket was lowered and covered with earth before the mourners left the cemetery. Today, some families continue this practice and others choose to place some earth on the raised coffin. At the end of the service, mourners leave the cemetery walking between two lines formed by family and friends offering comfort and support. With this shift from honoring the dead to consoling the bereaved, the official mourning period begins.

## Mourning

### What home rituals are observed by mourners upon returning from the cemetery?

*Hand washing* – Before entering the home, mourners and those who have been to the cemetery customarily pour water on their hands as a symbolic act of purification. Alternatively, this practice may be performed at the cemetery.

*Meal of consolation* – Mourners do not need to act as hosts or to entertain people after the funeral. Customarily, family or friends prepare a light dairy meal and serve it to the mourners. Since eggs are one of the few substances that become harder when subjected to heat, hard boiled eggs are included as a symbol of strength.

# Mourning (cont.)

## What is the kaddish?

An ancient prose poem, the kaddish praises God for life and anticipates peace on earth. It has five variations; one is the mourner's kaddish intended as a statement of faith at a time when we feel most threatened and fragmented. Mourners recite the kaddish throughout the mourning period.

## How long is the mourning period?

**Shiva** – The first seven-day period after death, called shiva, is a time of intensive mourning. During shiva, the kaddish is said daily at home in the presence of a minyan. Mourners are encouraged to refrain from work and other routine activities and to remain at home so that friends, family, neighbors and colleagues can visit to offer comfort. Shiva ends on the morning of the seventh day after burial. Shabbat is counted as part of the shiva although the public rituals, such as sitting on a low stool or wearing a kria ribbon, are not observed. The Festivals affect shiva in several ways. Please consult the rabbis.

**Shloshim** – The first thirty-day period of mourning after burial is called shloshim. All mourners recite the kaddish and refrain from public acts of joy. Children who have lost a parent continue to mourn for a year and say kaddish for 11 months and one day. For all other mourners, the official mourning period ends at the conclusion of shloshim.

**Yahrzeit** – The anniversary of a death, yahrzeit, is observed each year by reciting kaddish at the synagogue, lighting a memorial lamp at home, and giving tzedakah in memory of the deceased.

# Memorials

## How do Jews memorialize the dead?

Jewish tradition provides several ways for memorializing the dead.

**Yizkor** – Memorial prayers, *yizkor*, are recited as a congregation four times a year: on *Yom Kippur* and on the three major festivals, *Shemini Atzeret*, which comes at the end of *Sukkot*, the last day of *Pesach*, and the second day of *Shavuot*.

**Gravestones** – Jewish law requires that a grave be marked, but neither the type of marker nor the inscription itself is specified. Cemeteries have varying requirements about size and placement of such markers. Inscriptions usually include the name of the deceased in Hebrew and in English as well as the date of birth and date of death. Sometimes other information is noted or a quotation about the person is added. Many end with five Hebrew letters, which are an abbreviation for the phrase *t'hee nishmato/nishmata tzrura b'tzor hechaim*, "may his/her soul be bound up in the bond of life."

**Unveiling** – This ceremony, which is not required by Jewish law, has come to include the recitation of a few psalms, the chanting of *Eyl Malei Rachamim*, the mourner's *kaddish*, and a few words spoken about the deceased. It may be held any time after the thirty days from the day of the funeral. Family members themselves often conduct these simple services.

**Synagogue Plaques** – Adas Israel has memorial boards in the Smith Sanctuary displaying plaques with the names of many deceased members. A light is lit next to the name each year during the month in which the *yahrzeit* falls. Arrangements for the purchase of these plaques may be made through the synagogue office.

### Selected Readings

*Books and articles that offer fuller discussion of Jewish bereavement and funeral traditions:*

*The Jewish Mourners Handbook* (West Orange, New Jersey: Behrman House).

Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* (New York: Jonathan David Publishers) 1969.

Ron Wolfson, *A Time to Mourn a Time to Comfort* (Philadelphia: Jewish Lights Publishing) 1996.

*Books that can be a source of comfort:*

Sidney Greenberg, ed., *A Treasury of Comfort*, (North Hollywood, California: Wilshire Books) 1970.

Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken Books) 1981.

Jack Reimer, ed., *Jewish Reflections on Death* (New York: Schocken Books) 1974.

## Planning Ahead

Decisions regarding funeral arrangements can be discussed at any time with the rabbis and synagogue staff. At the time of death, Adas Israel assists bereaved families by reviewing funeral and burial practices, providing information about funeral homes and cemeteries, and answering all questions.

The time of bereavement is an occasion of great stress. You may find it useful to fill in the enclosed information sheet and to have it available for members of your family.

**Full Names:**

**English**

**Hebrew**

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**Social Security Numbers**

Cards are kept \_\_\_\_\_

**Legal Advisor**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number \_\_\_\_\_

Will is kept \_\_\_\_\_

**Life Insurance Company/Agent**

Phone number \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Policies are kept \_\_\_\_\_

**Health & Accident/Agent**

Phone numbers \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Policies are kept \_\_\_\_\_

**Safe Deposit Box**

Number \_\_\_\_\_

Location \_\_\_\_\_

Key is kept \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Bank Accounts**

Account Number Location

Checking \_\_\_\_\_

Savings \_\_\_\_\_

Passbooks location \_\_\_\_\_

**Real Estate**

Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Securities**

Location \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Military Service**

Branch \_\_\_\_\_

Dates \_\_\_\_\_

Service No. \_\_\_\_\_

VA Claim No. \_\_\_\_\_

Gov't Insurance No. \_\_\_\_\_

Discharge papers are kept \_\_\_\_\_

**Birth Certificates**

Location \_\_\_\_\_

**Funeral Property**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Deed Number \_\_\_\_\_

Location \_\_\_\_\_

Number of spaces \_\_\_\_\_

**Funeral Home**

Choice of \_\_\_\_\_

Letter on file \_\_\_\_\_

**Relatives and close friends who should be notified**

Name

Address

Phone

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