

Jewish Burial & Mourning

Dear Friends,

When a loved one dies, it feels as if your entire world is torn apart. In such moments, it is the Jewish way to provide structure as a form of comfort. I am proud that the Marlboro Jewish Center provides this booklet of mourning rituals and customs. Guides such as this one are useful in confronting the challenges that arise due to bereavement.

This booklet is an attempt to offer you a brief overview. For a more detailed description of Jewish laws and customs surrounding death and mourning, please feel free to contact me. Also, I encourage you to consult the books and websites listed in this volume.

Mourning is a complicated time, marked by sadness and bittersweet memories. It is our sincere hope that this information will help and comfort you when you need it. I want to thank Jeff Barrie and Reba Schneiderman for all their hard work in creating this edition.

Shalom,

Rabbi Michael Pont

I. Contacting the Rabbi and the Funeral Home

The first step to take when a loved one dies is to call your Rabbi and to call a funeral home. Contacting your family Rabbi before finalizing any burial plans is very important. Aside from aiding you with adhering to Conservative Jewish law, your Rabbi has experience with bereaved families, final wishes of the departed, and other special situations that you may have to consider in planning a funeral, burial, and mourning observance.

The passing of a loved one can be stressful, and you should not have to go through this alone. Contact the rabbi through the ritual administrator at 732-536-2300. Do not hesitate to call, be it late at night, on the Sabbath, or during a Jewish holiday.

In arranging for a funeral, you will have to make decisions relatively quickly. Selecting a Jewish funeral home and cemetery are chief among them. Marlboro Jewish Center does not recommend one Jewish funeral home or cemetery over another.

Marlboro Jewish Center also has burial plots for sale to its members and to their Jewish family members.

Once your burial plans are finalized, you may request that the funeral and shiva information be sent to temple members via our e-mail contact list. Marlboro Jewish Center may also have other member services available to aid you through this time of sorrow, depending on your particular needs or circumstances.

The funeral home you select should have a relationship with a Chevra Kadisha, Jewish burial society, which performs tahara, the ritual purification (washing) of a body prior to burial.

No matter what the status of the deceased was or how privileged the life led, all bodies are wrapped in the same white shroud (tachrichim) prior to being placed in a coffin.

The deceased may be buried with their tallit (prayer shawl), with at least one of the tzitzit (fringes) cut.

At your request, funeral homes can make almost all the arrangements for burial. Everything from limousines to acknowledgment cards, including obituaries in local and Jewish newspapers, death certificates, and Yartzheit candles (memorial candle for the week of shiva) may be provided to ease the pain of a bereaved family.

II. Laws & Customs

Immediate burial is a hallmark of Judaism. It is tradition for the burial to take place as soon as possible, even on the same day of the death, but no more than two nights after the death. It is considered disrespectful to keep the body from being buried as soon as possible as the soul must

return to God, but the body is left to linger on earth. Only under certain circumstances may the burial be delayed.

The deceased may not be left alone until the burial is completed. A **shomer** (guard or watchman) is designated (or hired) to stay with the departed when no one else is present.

Jewish people do not have a wake (where the body is displayed) because it is Judaism's belief that the body should be brought to its resting place as soon as possible. Also, it is not customary to bring flowers to a funeral because the funeral is to be as simple as possible.

Embalming is forbidden by Jewish law. Removing blood and substituting chemical preservatives in the body is considered desecration of the deceased.

Autopsies are not allowed because it is considered defilement of the departed. A Rabbi must be consulted if an autopsy has to be done; however, organ donation (for an organ recipient) is considered a mitzvah by most halachic (Jewish legal) authorities across the Jewish spectrum.

Cremation is not allowed in Jewish law because the body was given to us as a gift from God who expects us to take care of ourselves and return to God in the best condition possible.

It is Orthodox law that a person be buried in the ground.

Wooden caskets are used in Jewish burials because it is our belief that we do not preserve the body, for as the body decays, the soul ascends to heaven. This is reflected within Jewish law as a preference for a simple, wooden, Aron (casket or coffin). It is also believed that death is the great equalizer. No matter what the status of the deceased was or how privileged the life led, we all come to the same end and should be buried in the same simple manner.

Traditionally, caskets are made of plain pine boards and use wooden pegs rather than nails or screws as fasteners. The interior is unlined, and some have four holes in the bottom that allow the body to come into contact with the earth.

III. The Funeral

Kria (tearing) is conducted at the funeral home or at the graveside. A Rabbi or a representative of the funeral home tears either a blouse, shirt, or jacket, or a symbolic black ribbon of the mourners as a sign of mourning. This garment is worn throughout Shiva.

For a child, the left side of the garment is ripped because it is nearer the heart. For all other family members, the right side of the garment is torn. The same custom applies to placement of the ribbon.

The service is generally brief. It might open with a Psalm or a Jewish text. It includes at least one eulogy by the rabbi, and family members and friends may also offer their reflections about

the deceased. The final prayer is El Maley Rachamim (God, full of compassion), followed by announcements about the interment, shiva, and other pertinent information.

Naturally, everyone who knew the departed can mourn; however, Judaism specifies immediate family members who are expected to observe the mourning period. They are the mother and father, son and daughter, brother (half-brother) and sister (half-sister), and husband and wife.

IV. Burial

Jewish cemeteries are not denominational; Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and non-practicing Jews can be buried in the same cemetery. As such, it is your duty, in consultation with your Rabbi, to make sure Conservative laws are adhered to in the burial process.

Filling in the grave is customary at Jewish burials. Under Conservative law, Jews must bury Jews. As a final show of respect for the departed, family members and friends may help fill in the grave. There are many variations of this; however, the most symbolic is tossing three shovels of earth on the coffin. Some customs insist the coffin should be covered by earth prior to leaving the gravesite. Others believe that the entire grave should be filled in. Contact your family Rabbi for guidance.

Everyone leaving the cemetery after a burial must ceremoniously wash their hands three times before entering a private home to symbolically separate death from life. It is custom that there be a container of water, a cup, and towels at the front door of the *Shiva* house so the mourners returning from the burial can wash their hands without disturbing those inside.

V. Kaddish

Kaddish (Holy) is an important and central blessing in every Jewish prayer service. Several variations of the Kaddish are used as functional separators between various sections of the prayer [service](#).

The Kaddish is not a prayer about death or mourning. It is an affirmation of life and faith in God. It reaffirms the mourner's relationship with God and God's will on earth.

The term "Kaddish" is often used to refer specifically to "The Mourners' Kaddish" said as part of the mourning ritual in Judaism. It shows both remembrance for those that have passed on, and one's continued devotion to God. Mourners "say Kaddish" for the first time at the burial service and continue to say Kaddish at prayer services in the presence of a minyan (a quorum of ten Jews, the age of 13 and over).

Kaddish is said for eleven (Jewish calendar) months for the loss of a parent and for 30 days (Shloshim) for the loss of any other family member.

Both sons and daughters may say Kaddish for a parent. Jews who have a non-Jewish parent may say Kaddish for that parent and follow the mourning rituals of Shiva and Shloshim.

If there is no one who can say Kaddish for the departed for the full mourning period, it is appropriate to designate someone else to say Kaddish. It is considered a privilege for the departed's soul to have someone say Kaddish.

VI. Shiva and Sheloshim

Shiva, the week of mourning, begins with the burial. During the week of Shiva, family members and friends come to comfort the mourners.

Visiting mourners is an essential part of Shiva. They should console and comfort mourners, and be respectful of and attentive to their needs. This includes making sure food or meals are brought to the Shiva home, and if necessary that chores are done, so the mourners may mourn without interruption for the departed.

Mourners should not work during the Shiva unless it is necessary. The term work extends beyond professional or business activities to yard work, housework, and even the preparation of meals.

It is tradition that for the first meal after the funeral, the mourners eat a hard-boiled egg, or something else round, to indicate that life is like an orb or a circle, with no beginning or end, just an endless cycle of life.

It is customary to bring food to a Shiva house. You should check whether the mourners keep kosher. If they do, either uncut fruit or goods from a kosher bakery or store are appropriate. The food is for the mourners so they do not have to make their own meals during Shiva.

It is also customary that there be a minyan in the Shiva house so that the mourners may say Kaddish in their home. If requested, Marlboro Jewish Center's Ritual committee can provide prayer books and leaders for evening prayer services. These leaders may either be temple clergy or volunteers.

Mourners sit on low stools as a symbol of being "brought low with grief," and should not stand up to greet visitors who have come to Shiva house. Also, it is customary to leave the front door of the Shiva house unlocked so that mourners may mourn for the departed without being interrupted.

Nowhere is it prescribed that Shiva stools should be uncomfortable, rather they should be low. If requested, Marlboro Jewish Center will provide you with Shiva chairs for the mourners to use.

All mirrors in the house where the mourners sit Shiva are covered, as mourners are not to be vain. Other customs that may be followed are the prohibition against wearing leather shoes, using make-up or perfume, shaving, haircuts, marital relations, entertainment, music, and dancing.

Shiva is interrupted by the Sabbath, whereupon the mourners may dress as usual, go to temple or synagogue and say Kaddish there.

Shiva ends on the morning of the seventh day; however, the arrival of a Jewish Holiday annuls the remainder of Shiva. (Please contact your family Rabbi for guidance if a death occurs on or near a Jewish Holiday.) After sitting Shiva it is customary for mourners to take a walk around the block as a symbol of their return to their normal world.

Shloshim is the 30 days of mourning which includes the Shiva period. Mourners return to their normal routines; however, they continue to say Kaddish at prayer services and do not attend weddings, bar/bat-mitzvahs or any event where there is music or dancing.

That said, there is a corollary that you do not postpone a simcha (joyous event, specifically a wedding or bar/bat-mitzvah) because you are in mourning. Consult your family Rabbi about how to address the issues of music and dancing.

VII. Visiting the cemetery and Unveiling

Customs vary when it comes to visiting the cemetery. In Israel mourners wait until after Shiva to visit the cemetery for the first time, while outside of Israel mourners generally wait for the Shloshim (thirty days) or eleven months mourning period to end before visiting the cemetery.

Visitors can bring live flowers, although it is the custom to put a pebble or stone on the tombstone. This is a symbol that someone has visited the gravesite to pay respect to the departed.

Customs also vary about the **Tombstone Unveiling** ceremony. While generally most people have an unveiling about a year after the death, it can be held earlier. Please consult with the Rabbi for more information.

Any information can be put on the tombstone. The usual practice is to place both the English and Hebrew names of the departed on the tombstone, along with his or her father's name. Some people may also list the birth date and the date that the person passed away. Jewish people who are Cohanim or Leviim also put symbols such as a pair of hands or a wash basin on the tombstone.

VIII. Yizkor and Yartzheit

The El Maley Rachamin (God, full of compassion) prayer is recited every year at *Yizkor* services. This prayer asks God to grant the departed eternal rest.

Yarzheit (anniversary of passing) is observed on the day the person passed away according to the Jewish calendar. A Yarzheit candle (which lasts 24 hours) is lit in the home and the Mourners' Kaddish is recited at a local prayer service.

Marlboro Jewish Center will mail you a reminder of Yarzheit. This is very important since the Yarzheit date changes every year because Yarzheit is based on the Jewish calendar. You can also memorialize the memory of a loved one by purchasing a brass memorial plaque to be mounted on our Yarzheit wall. Contact Marlboro Jewish Center's office for details.

Yizkor is a prayer service in memory of the departed. This service is part of the liturgy on Yom Kippur, Shimini Atzeret, the last day of Passover, and the second day of Shavuot.

In some communities there is a custom that discourages attending Yizkor services during the first year of mourning. It is our practice at Marlboro Jewish Center for mourners to attend Yizkor services during their first year of mourning.

IX. Additional information

Books:

Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead, and Mourn as a Jew, by Anita Diamant

Mourning & Mitzvah: A Guided Journal for Walking the Mourner's Path Through Grief to Healing, by Anne Brener

A Time to Mourn, a Time to Comfort: A Guide to Jewish Bereavement (The Art of Jewish Living), by Ron Wolfson

The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning (Revised and Expanded Edition), by Maurice Lamm

Websites:

www.myjewishlearning.com

www.jewish-funerals.org