

Guide to Mourning Practices

Congregation Har Shalom

Introduction

One of Judaism's most profound gifts is the comfort and support our tradition provides in the face of loss. It is my hope that this booklet will provide helpful information as you begin to mourn the passing of your loved one. I encourage you to make use of the fullness of our sacred mourning practices, which have been sensitively developed over many centuries of Jewish experience. Though it is our belief that observance of these rituals honors and elevates the soul of the departed, Jewish mourning is overwhelmingly for the purpose of comforting the bereaved. This booklet will briefly touch on a wide range of customs to provide as broad a background as possible for our community. In addition, you may always contact me directly with specific questions pertaining to your loss. The Har Shalom clergy and staff are here for you as you *walk through the valley of the shadow of death* (Psalm 23:4).

With heartfelt condolences,

Rabbi Adam J. Raskin

When A Loved One Dies...

1. Contact Har Shalom clergy
Rabbi Adam Raskin: (240) 687-7218
Hazzan Henrique Ozur Bass: (301) 221-0671
During office hours, you may also reach them
at (301) 299-7087
2. Contact a funeral home to begin making arrangements - please see the adjacent page for suggestions. Funeral providers have 24-hour phone operators. They will assist you with transportation, permits, documentation, and an obituary. They will also contact your chosen cemetery to determine available dates and times for the interment and/or funeral. **Please note that the date, time, and location of the funeral must be confirmed with Har Shalom clergy first.
3. If you have not already purchased cemetery plots and wish to have your loved one buried in the Har Shalom section of one of the three cemeteries on the adjacent page, contact Har Shalom's Executive Director or Facilities Manager: (301) 299-7087.
4. Discuss with your family the preferred location for the funeral service. Options include a Har Shalom sanctuary service, funeral home chapel, cemetery chapel / gazebo, or a complete graveside service.

Planning Resources

Funeral Homes

Though Har Shalom does not officially endorse any funeral provider, the following have experience working with our staff and facilities, in accordance with the mourning practices in this booklet:

- ★ Hines Rinaldi (301) 622-2290
11800 New Hampshire Ave, Silver Spring, MD 20904
- ★ Sagel-Bloomfield-Danzansky-Goldberg (301) 340-1400
1091 Rockville Pike, Rockville, MD 20852
- ★ Torchinsky (301) 495-3395
254 Carroll Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20012
- ★ Sol Levinson & Bros. (410) 653-8900
8900 Reisterstown Road, Pikesville, MD 21208

Purchasing / Reserving Cemetery Plots

Cemetery plots may be purchased through Har Shalom for the Har Shalom-owned sections of the following cemeteries:

- ★ Garden of Remembrance; Clarksburg, Maryland
- ★ Judean Memorial Gardens; Olney, Maryland
- ★ Mount Lebanon; Adelphi, Maryland

Please contact the Executive Director or the Facility Manager to discuss the purchase of plots.

Both may be reached at (301) 299-7087.

Who is a mourner?

It is a mitzvah to mourn for a father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister (including half-brother and half-sister), husband or wife. In the case of a beloved step-parent, grandparent, or close non-Jewish relative, you may choose from among these mourning rites in consultation with the rabbi.

Time between death and burial for the mourner

During the period between death and burial, the mourner is known as an *onen*. The most important duty of an *onen* is to arrange for the funeral and the burial. Therefore, an *onen* is exempt from positive commandments such as daily prayers and wearing tefillin. One does not say Kaddish before the funeral.

Scheduling a funeral

Jewish tradition calls for the dead to be buried as soon as possible, usually within twenty-four hours after death. However, a delay is permitted to make funeral arrangements, or for the sake of honoring the dead by waiting for relatives and friends who must travel great distances. In addition, the funeral must be delayed if Shabbat or a Festival occurs immediately following the death.

Respect for the dead

Judaism teaches that human life is sacred. The human body deserves respect, even after the breath of life has departed. Respect for the dead is a fundamental principle governing Jewish practice. One expression of this respect is *tahara*, the ritual washing of the dead body which is then dressed in

burial shrouds. This function is performed by members of the *hevra kadisha*, a group devoted to the ritual burial of the dead. At the request of the family, the funeral home typically arranges for the *tahara* as well as the customs mentioned below.

The body of the deceased is often clothed in plain white linen, cotton, or muslin shrouds. The reason for this practice is the feeling that all Jews should be buried in the same type of inexpensive garments. This practice also emphasizes that all people, rich and poor alike, are equal before God. The same principle is reflected in the practice of using a plain, inexpensive wooden casket. A man is customarily buried in a tallit that he used during his life, after one of the fringes has been cut to make it ritually unfit. Objects of value for the living are not to be buried with the dead. It is a Jewish tradition to have a closed casket. It is also considered inappropriate to apply cosmetics to the deceased or to bury the deceased in anything other than burial shrouds. Autopsies are generally forbidden unless critical information pertaining to the health of others could be determined, or in cases of criminal investigation.

Another way of showing respect for the dead is that the deceased is not to be left alone before the funeral. In order to maintain a constant watch, arrangements may be made for individuals (*shomrim*, attendants), who may be family or friends, to be with the body day and night. Those who are with the body should spend their time chanting and reading from the Book of Psalms. This *shemirah* (attending the body) may be arranged with the funeral home.

Kriah

Kriah, a tear made in the mourner's clothing or on a ribbon attached to the clothing, is an external symbol of inner grief and mourning, a symbolic representation of a broken heart. *Kriah* is usually done immediately preceding the start of the funeral service, assisted by the Rabbi and/or Hazzan. A blessing is recited by the mourner just before tearing *kriah*: *Baruch attah A-donai E-loheinu melech ha'olam, dayan ha'emet* ("Praised are You, Lord our God, Sovereign of the universe, the true judge"). Like the Mourner's Kaddish, this blessing is a reaffirmation of faith, and of the value of life, made at a time of intense sorrow and pain. A torn garment (or ribbon) is worn throughout the seven days of shiva, but not on Shabbat.

The Funeral and Burial

Both the funeral and burial services are typically brief. In addition to certain prayers and biblical readings, it is appropriate for a member of the clergy to recite a eulogy for the loved one. Family members and friends may also speak. Keep in mind that it is also appropriate for loved ones to speak at shiva services later.

At the gravesite, relatives and friends will drop several spadefuls of earth on the lowered casket or may choose to cover the casket fully as the last act of kindness one can do for another, a kindness for which we expect no recompense. The memorial prayer (*El Maleh Rachamim*) and Kaddish are then recited. At the conclusion of the burial, it is customary for the mourners to walk between two lines formed by the others present, who say,

Hamakom y'nachem etchem b'toch sh'ar avilei tzion v'yirushalayim ("May God comfort you along with all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem").

Return from the Cemetery

It is customary to rinse the hands (without a blessing) before entering the home upon returning from the cemetery, using a pitcher filled with water left outside the door for that purpose. A candle (furnished by the funeral home) is lit (without a blessing) upon returning from the cemetery. This candle, which symbolizes the eternal soul, burns continuously for seven days.

A mourner's first meal after returning from the cemetery is provided by friends and neighbors, who thus express their concern in a tangible way. The meal customarily includes round foods such as hard-boiled eggs or lentils, symbolizing the circle of life and hope for the future. Neither wine nor meat is normally served at this meal. Subsequent shiva meals may be either meat or dairy. In order to be freed from physical distractions, some people cover mirrors or turn them to the wall in a house of mourning.

The Mourner's Kaddish

A mourner first recites Kaddish at the cemetery after burial. Although the Kaddish is generally thought of as a prayer for the dead, it is essentially an affirmation of life and faith. It confronts death with life. Reciting the Mourner's Kaddish is an act of looking to the future, and all of life, with faith and hope, in the presence of grief and despair.

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Kaddish is an Aramaic word meaning “holy.” Recitation of Kaddish is an act of hallowing and praising God and God’s name. In Jewish tradition, such an act must take place in public assembly, which is defined as at least a quorum of ten Jewish adults (a *minyan*). Thus the Kaddish, in any variation, is recited only in the presence of a minyan. Mourner’s Kaddish is recited for eleven months minus one day for a parent; for other relatives it is recited for thirty days.

Shiva

We sit shiva for a father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister (including half-brother and half-sister), husband or wife. Shiva means “seven,” the number of days in the stage of mourning which begins after burial. While sitting shiva, in recognition of the shock of the loss of the loved one, the mourners traditionally abstain from business and professional activities, cutting hair and shaving.

The period of shiva is intentionally set aside from normal, everyday life in order to enable mourners to gather their thoughts, to focus on memories of the deceased, and to be comforted by members of the community. Traditionally during shiva, the mourner should be waited upon, brought meals, and cared for by family, friends and community. The mourner is not the “host” of shiva, but rather, the recipient of communal care. The purpose of shiva is to give voice to sadness, not to suppress it.

Traditionally, mourners do not wear leather shoes, and sit on low stools or chairs during shiva (except while eating). This practice is symbolic of the reality of being “brought low” by grief.

For each day of the shiva, a member of the clergy or congregation will make him- or herself available to lead an evening and/or morning minyan in the mourner's house, thereby allowing the mourners to recite Kaddish in their own home.

The day of the burial counts as the first day of shiva. Shiva ends on the morning of the seventh day, after one hour. Shabbat is included in counting the seven days, although on Shabbat no outward signs of mourning apply. On Shabbat, mourners are permitted to wear regular shoes, sit on regular chairs, and change into clothing that bears no signs of mourning. It is also appropriate for them to attend synagogue services on Shabbat. On Friday (unless it is the seventh day of shiva) or on the day before a Festival, shiva is observed until two and one half hours before sunset.

For the last day of shiva, the mourners should "get up" from shiva and take a short walk outside together, symbolizing their return to life's normal routine.

Period of mourning

When mourning a parent, one mourns for twelve months after the day of death, which is one month longer than the period of saying Kaddish. When mourning a relative other than a parent, one mourns for a period of thirty days, which is called *sheloshim* ("thirty"). That period ends on the morning of the thirtieth day after the funeral. During the mourning period, whether thirty days or twelve months, traditionally, a mourner does not participate in general festivities and avoids public places of entertainment.

Unveiling

It is customary to place a tombstone on a grave, dedicating it in a brief ceremony, called an “unveiling.” That ceremony may take place at any time after the period of shiva, although it typically occurs within a year after the death. A clergy member can but need not officiate.

Yahrzeit

Yahrzeit is observed on each anniversary of the day of death **according to the Hebrew calendar**. The yahrzeit is a solemn day of personal reflection and remembrance. Through a variety of rituals and traditions, Judaism helps us experience this unique occasion and teaches us ways to honor the memory of those we have lost.

A memorial yahrzeit candle should burn in the home during the twenty-four hour period of yahrzeit, sunset to sunset, starting on the evening preceding the day; no blessing is recited over it. When the yahrzeit coincides with Shabbat or a Festival, the yahrzeit candle should be lit before the candle-lighting for the day. Mourner’s Kaddish is recited at all services on the yahrzeit, from the evening service – *ma’ariv* – on the night before through the morning service – *shaharit* – through the afternoon – *minha* – service on the day itself, during which time the name of your loved one is blessed by our clergy. In addition to saying Kaddish, we remember our loved ones through *tzedakah* (charity) and good deeds. You will receive a reminder in the mail from our office about your yahrzeits.

Yizkor

The Jewish calendar includes four unique opportunities to remember, and on which it is appropriate to say Kaddish. These *Yizkor* (“May God remember”) services in memory of the dead are held on Yom Kippur, Shemini Atzeret, the last day of Pesach and the second day of Shavuot. It is traditionally a time for those who have lost a loved one to recite memorial prayers and Kaddish.

How Congregation Har Shalom can help

Immediately following a loss, you will be contacted by a member of our Hevra Kadisha Committee to discuss how Har Shalom can be most helpful during this stressful and sorrowful time.

Har Shalom will:

- ★ help set up your home for shiva while you are at the funeral, including:
 - ★ receiving food deliveries and setting out food
 - ★ covering mirrors
 - ★ putting out water for hand-washing upon returning from the cemetery before entering the home
 - ★ bringing shiva chairs, kippot, and prayer books
 - ★ lead shiva minyanim as requested
 - ★ ensure that you have the required number of people for your shiva minyan
 - ★ provide a meal (following the funeral and burial) for 10 mourners

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- ★ send a yahrzeit reminder approximately one month prior to the yahrzeit observance of your loved one
- ★ provide the opportunity to memorialize your loved one through purchasing a permanent plaque displayed in our Burke Sanctuary

If you have specific questions, please be in touch with a member of the clergy or the Assistant to the Clergy.

Making a Shiva Visit

(by Dr. Ron Wolfson, adapted)

Comforting mourners is an important mitzvah. Listen for an announcement at the funeral service for the times that the mourner(s) will be receiving guests. Usually the options are immediately after the funeral, around the minyanim in the evenings and/or mornings, or during the day. Should you wish to visit during another time, you may want to call ahead. Coming toward the end of shiva, when it is frequently more difficult to gather a minyan, can be appreciated.

Do not ring the doorbell. The front door of most shiva homes will be left open or unlocked, since all are invited to comfort the mourners. This eliminates the need for the mourners to answer the door. On a practical level, it avoids the constant disruptive ringing of the bell.

Go to the mourners as soon as possible. What do you say? The tradition suggests being silent, allowing the mourner to open the conversation.

Simply offering a hug, a kiss, a handshake, an arm around the shoulder speaks volumes. If you do want to open a conversation, start with a simple “I’m so sorry” or “I don’t know what to say. This must be really difficult for you” or “I was so sorry to hear about _____.” Be sure to name the deceased. Why? Because one of the most powerful ways to comfort mourners is to encourage them to remember the deceased.

Recall something personal: “I loved _____. Remember the times we went on vacation together? She adored you so much.” If you did not know the deceased, ask about him/her – about the details of his/her life, or about the relationship with the mourner(s). Do not tell people not to cry or that they will get over it. Crying is a normal part of the grieving process. And, as most people who have been bereaved will tell you, you never “get over” a loss; you only get used to it.

Spend anywhere from a few moments to 10 minutes with the mourners. There will be others who also want to speak with them, and you can always come back. If you are the only visitor, then, of course, spend as much time as you wish.

If a prayer service is conducted during your visit, participate to the extent you can. If you do not know the service, sit or stand respectfully while it is in progress. If the rabbi or leader asks for stories about the deceased, do not hesitate to share one, even if it is somewhat humorous.

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The entire purpose of shiva is to focus on the life of the person who has died and his or her relationship to the family and friends in that room.

Inevitably, you will encounter other friends and acquaintances at a house of mourning. Your natural instinct will be to ask about them, to share the latest joke, to shmooze about sports or politics. However, you should be careful to avoid raucous humor, tasteless jokes, loud talk, and gossip.

A shiva visit should be no more than an hour. If a service is held, come a few minutes before and stay a few after. Mourners uniformly report how exhausted they are by the shiva experience; do not overstay your welcome.

When you are ready to leave, you may want to wish the bereaved good health and strength, long life, and other blessings. The formal farewell to a mourner is the same Hebrew phrase offered at the gravesite and in the synagogue on Friday evening:

May G-d comfort	<i>Ha-makom yenakhem</i>
You	<i>etkhem</i> [many mourners]
	<i>otakh</i> [one female]
	<i>ot'kha</i> [one male]
	<i>etkhen</i> [more than one female]
among the other	<i>b'tokh sh'ar</i>
Mourners	<i>a'veelay</i>
of Zion and Jerusalem.	<i>Tzion v'Y'rushalayim.</i>

Ha-Makom is a name of God that literally means “the place,” referring to God's omnipresent nature, including at the lifecycles from birth to death. It is only God who can grant the mourner lasting comfort. The comforter comes to remind the mourners that the divine powers of the universe will enable them to heal and go on with a meaningful life. Ultimate consolation comes only from the omnipresent God.

Suggested Prayer for Lighting a Yahrzeit Candle

Although there is no prescribed prayer for lighting a yahrzeit candle, you may include the following meditation in addition to your own personal memories:

I haven't forgotten you, even though it's been some time now since I've seen your face, touched your hand, heard your voice. You are with me all the time. I used to think you left me. I know better now. You come to me.

Sometimes in fleeting moments I feel your presence close by. But I still miss you. And nothing, no person, no joy, no accomplishment, no distraction, not even God, can fill the gaping hole your absence has left in my life.

But mixed together with all the sadness, there is a great joy for having known you. I want to thank you for the time we shared, for the love you gave, for the wisdom you spread. Thank you for the magnificent moments and for the ordinary ones too. There was beauty in our simplicity. Holiness in our unspectacular days. And I will carry the lessons you taught me always.

Your life has ended, but your light can never be extinguished. It continues to shine upon me even on the darkest nights and illuminates my way. I light this candle in your honor and in your memory. May God bless you as you have blessed me with love, with grace, and with peace. Amen.

--Rabbi Naomi Levy



For additional guidance on Jewish mourning practices,
please contact one of the Har Shalom clergy:

Rabbi Adam Raskin: (240) 687-7218

Hazzan Henrique Ozur Bass: (301) 221-0671

To arrange for assistance from the Hevra Kadisha Committee,
contact the Chair, hevradisha@harshalom.org,
or the Assistant to the Clergy: (301) 299-7087 ext. 1.

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