



Congregation Kol Emeth
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GUIDANCE

FOR A TIME OF GREAT LOSS

Jewish tradition is very wise as it gently guides us in times of great loss. Its teachings and rituals governing death, burial, and mourning stem from our people's encounter with mortality over millennia. They are honest, compassionate, and straight-forward. They provide structure, empathy, and comfort when we need them most.

With the support of Sinai Memorial Chapel, the exemplary Chevra Kadisha in our community, we want you to be aware of this rich repository of wisdom. We hope it will assist you in thinking about the future. We especially want to share with you the standards we have adopted for our congregation.



Sinai Memorial Chapel – Chevra Kadisha (FD1830)
777 Woodside Road, Suite "C"
Redwood City, CA 94162

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Pre-Need Arrangements

One of the most compassionate gifts we can give to those dear ones who survive us is to make arrangements long before the end of our lives for funeral and burial. Sinai Memorial Chapel with its new office in Redwood City (650-369-3636) makes pre-need agreements very easy as does Hills Of Eternity, the cemetery in Colma where Kol Emeth has long maintained a special section. Hills of Eternity is owned by Congregation Sherith Israel of San Francisco. The administrator of the cemetery is Steve Weiner, and he can be reached at his office in Colma (650-756-3633). The director at Sinai is Wayne Rose. In pre-need agreements, payments can be made comfortably over time.

If one is fairly certain that one's life will be lived in the Bay Area, it is recommended to look into such arrangements. In tranquil times, making considered decisions is easier than at a critical time of need; and one can assure that one's own wishes will be honored. It is, however, possible to make all the necessary decisions at the time of need as well.

We encourage everyone to compose a Living Will and an Ethical Will while one is in a state of good health. Among the provisions in a Living Will is a decision about organ donation. Organ donation at the time of death is strongly endorsed by contemporary teachers of Halachah. To be able to grant life to others at the time of one's own passing is considered a very great Mitzvah and can be a source of comfort to mourners. It is vital that the wishes of every person on this subject be well-known to those close. Kol Emeth maintains legal forms to be used which are in accordance with Jewish tradition.

When Death Is Near

When a loved one nears the end of life without hope of recovery, we are taught to be present to the other as though he or she is completely vital. This is not the time to make arrangements with the mortuary or the cemetery. We simply show our love and caring until the last breath.

At the Time Of Passing

When that moment has come, at any hour of day or night, it is best to contact Sinai which maintains an emergency answering service. It is also recommended that the rabbi be called. Sinai will dispatch a vehicle and driver to pick up and carry the body to Sinai's facility in San Francisco.

If there is a death on Shabbat, it is customary to delay the pick-up until the end of Shabbat at nightfall on Saturday evening. In a hospital or nursing facility, there will be provisions to hold the deceased for that period of time. At home, the body is respectfully covered until the end of Shabbat. Away from home, a form releasing the body to Sinai is required by law.

Autopsy is forbidden unless there is a very cogent medical reason to override Jewish law. When civil law requires an autopsy, however, we comply.

Making Arrangements With Sinai

Soon after the deceased is removed, the family meets with a representative of Sinai to make decisions about the funeral and burial. The time for the funeral is set with the help of the rabbi. If there were no pre-need arrangements for plots, the Sinai staff assists in contacting the cemetery. At the meeting with Sinai staff, the family chooses a casket. Tradition advises simplicity, a plain, wooden casket which is made without any metal. It is fastened with wooden dowels. Sinai does maintain many samples of caskets varying greatly in cost, but the simplest one is highly recommended.

Care Of the Body

At Sinai's facility, the body is washed in accordance with Jewish law (the Taharah). Men on the Sinai staff attend to a man while female staff care for a woman. The Taharah is a simple, ritual washing. Nothing more is done for cosmetic purposes. The Halachah is opposed to embalming.

The Funeral And the Burial Service

Then the body is dressed in a simple white robe with pants and a cap. These "tachrichin" are identical for everyone. A tallit worn during life is often worn by the deceased with one of the four fringes (tzitziot) cut off. A complete ritual such as a tallit is not to be buried. Soil from the land of Israel is placed inside the casket.

Shmirah-Attending the Body

From the time of death until burial, it is customary to arrange "shmirah", a living human presence. A body should not be left alone. It is considered to be a great Mitzvah to be among the shomrim (the guardians) even through the night. Shomrim sit quietly, often reading Psalms or other appropriate literature. It is possible and encouraged for good friends and family members who are not among the mourners to participate as shomrim. Sinai also has shomrim available who work for a modest fee.

Obligations Before Burial

Mourners have no religious obligations from the time of death of a loved one until burial. Kaddish is not yet said, nor does the formal shiva begin. Even daily prayer and wearing tallit and tefillin are suspended. If Shabbat intervenes, it is observed, but one need not attend the synagogue services. Instead the focus is on preparing for the funeral, notifying others, and simply being present for one another.

One of the rabbis will want to meet with the mourners as soon as possible to help in any way possible. The purpose of the meeting is also to plan for the funeral and the shiva period and to prepare for the eulogy. The congregation will also want to send out a notice by email to the entire congregation informing everyone of the family's plans.

Burial

Jewish tradition requires burial in the earth as soon as possible. Burial should be in a Jewish cemetery. Cremation is very much at variance with Halachah. We are taught that we never hold title to our bodies. We care for them in life, and we return them to the earth at death without any intervention. If there is a cremation or burial in a non-Jewish cemetery, the rabbis are not able to officiate.

The funeral service generally takes place at the cemetery either in the chapel or at the gravesite. At times the service is held in the synagogue with a procession then leading to the cemetery. Shiva begins at the outset of the service when "kriah", or "tearing" is performed. Tearing clothing or tearing a black ribbon affixed to the clothing of mourners preceded by a blessing inaugurates the shiva period. The ribbon or the torn clothing are worn for the entire shiva period. Some wear them for thirty days.

The service is characterized by simplicity with selected readings, the rabbi's eulogy, and the El Moley, the Memorial prayer. At the family's discretion, others may be invited to give eulogies. Pall-bearers then move the casket out to the waiting hearse. Reassembling near the grave-site, the pall bearers then move slowly to the grave with everyone following behind. It is customary to stop briefly seven times in this journey to the grave to indicate that we are in no hurry to complete this last act of love and respect.

At the gravesite, the casket is immediately lowered. Brief prayers are said, and Kaddish is said for the first time. Before Kaddish, everyone is invited to share in the Mitzvah of burial. The service concludes with people asked to form two parallel lines facing one another and leading away from the grave, a symbol of support from a caring community. The mourners and immediate family pass between the lines and hear the traditional words of comfort: "HaMakom yi-nachem et-chem b'toch shaar a-vay-lay Tzion Ve-rushalayim." "May God comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." The family returns home to begin sitting Shiva.

Shiva

Upon arrival at home, a meal has been prepared for all. It is called the "Seudat Hav-ra-ah", the "healing meal". Our Chesed Committee, working along with good friends, often prepares the meal and the home for shiva. The long-burning shiva candle is lit.

Shiva is the most intense period of mourning. Its essence is setting aside substantial time with no other purpose other than to mourn surrounded by family and friends. Beginning at the funeral, the shiva continues for seven days. Each day ends at sunset, so the first day, the day of the funeral, is short. Five full days ordinarily follow. The seventh day is also short, ending about one hour into the day after morning prayers. Every shiva contains a Shabbat. That day counts among the seven, but the mourners do not sit at home but rather attend services in the synagogue.

When a major holiday intervenes, shiva and shloshim are altered. The rabbi will guide you at such a time.

During shiva, the community comes to the mourner's home. Services are often held at home with books provided by the congregation. Our custom has been to focus on evening services although a minyan in the morning can be arranged. The minyan provides a focal time for people to visit although often visits occur at other times as well.

There are many ritual customs during shiva including covering mirrors and provision for mourners to sit on a low stool or on the frame of upholstered furniture. The mourners should not act as hosts even in their own home. A book will be provided with a full treatment of the details of practice.

At the conclusion of the shiva period, it is customary for the mourners to walk outside around the block, a symbol of beginning to return to one's normal activities.

Shloshim And Twelve Months

The mourner then enters into the next stage which is called "shloshim" or "thirty". This period actually includes shiva. It continues for 23 more days. Every mourner has a thirty day period of grieving. Tradition mandates a year of mourning only for parents, a testimony to the unique debt each of us has for the gift of life itself. There is really no difference in practice between shloshim and the year. One returns to normal activities, pausing each day to join in a minyan to say Kaddish. It is customary to absent oneself from celebratory events during the mourning period. Yet one can attend a Bar Mitzvah or wedding ceremony and depart before the party begins. Some do not listen to music and avoid entertainment such as TV and movies.

When mourning for a parent, the required time to say Kaddish concludes after eleven months on the Jewish calendar. Technically one remains in mourning for the full twelve months.

Dedicating a Monument

In Ashkenazic practice, the monument at the grave-site is not placed or dedicated until a full year has passed. The stone monument is an artificial aid to one's memory, and it is not needed as the earlier stages of mourning unfold. However there is flexibility in this custom depending, for example, on the seasons and when it is possible to bring family members together

Yahrzeit And Yizkor

The anniversary of the death of a loved one according to the Jewish calendar becomes thereafter a sacred personal day. The synagogue will want to record that day and send reminders every year. On that day, it is customary to light a yahrzeit candle at sundown, to say kaddish in a minyan, and to do an act of tzedaka.

Four times each year, on Yom Kippur and on the three major festivals, memorial prayers are said as part of the service. During the first year after a loved one passes away, it is customary not to say Yizkor prayers for that person in particular. The reason is identical to the reason to delay placing the monument. Yizkor is also an artificial aid to memory which is not needed when grief is so fresh.

ESSENTIAL PHONE NUMBERS

SINAI MEMORIAL CHAPEL

(Wayne Rose, Director)
650-369-3636

HILLS OF ETERNITY

(Steve Weiner, Director)
650-756-3633

CONGREGATION KOL EMETH

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