

## TIPS FOR ATTENDING A JEWISH FUNERAL

Written by Rabbi Ruth Adar; adapted by Rabbi Rachel Gurevitz

- 1) **Be Present for your friend.** You do not need to say much to mourners; in fact, the less said, the better. Nothing you say is going to fix it. What will help most is your presence at the funeral or at *shiva* (more about that in a minute.) Say “I am so sorry”, but in Jewish tradition, there is no need to say anything at all unless the mourner starts the conversation. If it seems that they want to talk, take the opportunity to learn about the person they are mourning.
- 2) **Dress:** Dress nicely – smart casual, but wear sensible shoes if you are going to the graveside – you don’t want any high heels getting stuck in the mud.
- 3) **Arrive early for the funeral** (up to 30 minutes before the start time). There is usually an opportunity to offer your condolences before the funeral starts, but in Jewish tradition the family will either leave directly from the funeral chapel to go to the cemetery or leave directly from the cemetery to go home and it is not appropriate to hold them up to greet them at either of those locations after the service.
- 4) **At the funeral chapel** people will sit and speak in low voices while they wait for the service to start. You will most likely see a closed casket (see below for more on this) at the front of the chapel. Low key is the key. If you find friends there, just remember that this IS a funeral: talk quietly. Turn OFF the cell phone for the service, and do not fiddle with it.
- 5) **Mostly, just listen.** There is very little required of the congregation at a funeral. Your job is to be there. There will be a few prayers, some psalms, and eulogies. Say “Amen” when the congregation says it, if you wish. You may hear some wonderful stories about the deceased and there may be moments of laughter mixed in with the sadness of saying goodbye.
- 6) **At the graveside.** Some funerals move from a chapel to graveside, some are held at graveside. If you do not know the family well, it is OK to attend the chapel service and then skip the graveside service. There will be further opportunities to visit with your friend at the shiva (see below). When there is a chapel service first, the graveside ritual only takes about 10 minutes. At the graveside, there will likely be chairs under an awning facing the open grave. Those chairs are for mourners; you do not want to sit in them unless you are a member of the family or disabled. There will be a few prayers, the casket will be lowered, and the officiant may assist the family in the ancient custom of shoveling earth into the grave. One or three shovelfuls is typical, and after the family, anyone else present may also help with this loving custom. It is a symbolic way of participating in caring for the body by putting it safely in the earth.
- 7) **Shiva.** There may be an announcement about *shiva*, the gathering at the home for (traditionally) seven days after the burial (although many families have fewer than 7 days opened to visitors). If the family announces specific times, go only at those times. Traditionally, there is no shiva from sundown on Friday until Saturday night (the Jewish Sabbath). At the shiva house, remember that your presence is what matters – even if you can only stay for 30 minutes or less. You cannot make their pain go away with words. Mourners need time and space to mourn, and it is an act of kindness to give them the opportunity to do so. There may be pictures of the deceased and asking questions about the photos can be another good way of hearing stories about them. There may be a short service at the shiva house at some point in evening. You can linger, but do not overstay:

when people start leaving, go. Keep in mind that this is not a party, the mourners are not “entertaining.”

- 8) **Food.** Sending or bringing prepared food is a very nice thing to do. It can be a plate to put out during shiva, or it can be a meal that go in the fridge or freezer so that the family doesn't have to think about cooking or shopping for the week. If you do not know the family's level of observance of kashrut (traditional Jewish food laws), play safe and bring something with no meat or shellfish.
- 9) **Donations.** Most families will designate a charity to which donations (*tzedakah*) may be made in memory of the dead, and most non-profits are happy to send a card to the mourners telling them about your gift. This is not required, but it is a very nice thing to do. Which brings us to:

#### **10) THINGS YOU WILL NOT SEE OR HEAR AT A TRADITIONAL JEWISH FUNERAL:**

- **Flowers** – instead, Jews give donations to a memorial fund. (See #8 above)
- **An open casket** – We don't look at a dead person unnecessarily, since they cannot look back at us.
- **A fancy casket** – Traditionally, Jewish caskets are plain, unfinished wood. (However, at a somewhat less traditional Jewish funeral, there may be a fancy casket, or there may have been a cremation.)
- **Talk about the afterlife** – Most Jews focus on doing good in this life. We don't know for sure what happens after death, and you won't hear much about that at the funeral, other than perhaps some references to the eternity of the soul.