

## Preface

*Four things are beautiful beyond belief:  
The pleasant weakness that comes after pain,  
The radiant greenness that comes after rain,  
The deepened faith that follows after grief,  
and the re-awakening to love again.*

Author Unknown

Dear Community Member,

As we face moments of loss and navigate the challenging period surrounding death, it is essential to be guided by the principles of our Jewish tradition that have developed over 3000 years. Congregation Kol Shofar's "Guide to Jewish Funeral Practice" serves as a valuable resource during these times.

This comprehensive document emphasizes the sacredness and dignity inherent in Jewish funerals, offering guidance on preplanning, mourning practices, funeral arrangements, and burial customs.

May this guide provide solace and clarity as we uphold our traditions and honor the sanctity of life, even in moments of sorrow.

With heartfelt condolences,  
The Kol Shofar Clergy  
Members of the Kol Shofar Ritual Committee

## **Guide to Jewish Funeral Practice Congregation Kol Shofar**

### **Introduction**

A Jewish funeral is a sacred rite and should be invested with both dignity and simplicity as taught by Jewish tradition. The family of the deceased should consult the Rabbi when death occurs. Preplanning is encouraged. (See 7.2 of this Guide)

The Jewish way of dealing with death is one part of a larger philosophy of life. Judaism holds that, even after death, the body, which once held a holy human life, retains its sanctity. Our sages have compared the sacredness of the deceased to that of an impaired Torah scroll which, although no longer useable, retains its holiness. In Jewish tradition, therefore, the greatest consideration and respect are accorded the dead.

Jewish tradition has imbued mourning practices with profound religious significance. To this end, Jewish funerals avoid ostentation; family and visitors reflect in dress and deportment the solemnity of the occasion; flowers and music are discouraged; embalming and viewing are avoided; and interment takes place as soon as possible after death.

The preparation and burial of the body are highly valued *mitzvot*. When a member of a community dies, it is the community's responsibility to lovingly assist the deceased's family in this final act.

### **1. Role of the Rabbi**

- *1.1 Rabbinic Consultation* - Families should consult the Rabbi as soon as possible when death occurs.
- *1.2 Rabbinic Guidance* - Any questions regarding funeral arrangements and periods of mourning should be referred to the Rabbi for guidance.

### **2. Roles of the Hevra Kaddisha, Cemetery Societies**

- *2.1 Hevra Kaddisha* – The Kol Shofar Hevra Kaddisha is primarily involved in *Shemirah* and *Taharah*. See 3.2 and 4.4 of this guide.

### **3. When Death Occurs**

- *3.1 Time of Funeral/Burial* - Burial should take place as soon after death as possible. In America, many Jewish communities try to bury within three days. Burial may be delayed for legal reasons; to transport the deceased; if close relatives must travel long distances to be present at the funeral/burial; or to avoid burial on Shabbat or another holy day. It should not be delayed longer than necessary.
- *3.2 Attending to the Body – Sh'mirah* – Jewish tradition requires that the deceased not be left alone prior to burial. Hospitals should be requested to avoid disturbing the remains until the arrival of a *Shomer* (guardian). It is preferable that *shomrim* be members of the family, friends of the deceased, or members of the Hevra Kaddisha. Psalms are customarily recited by the *shomrim*.

#### 4. Time Between Death and Burial – *Aninut*

- *4.1 Autopsies and Organ Donation* – Performing an autopsy is contrary to Jewish law, since autopsies are viewed as a desecration of the body. In most cases, when an autopsy is recommended, the family can refuse, but should be done when law requires one. Organ donation may be viewed as an example of *K'vod Ha-met* (respect for the deceased) which brings healing to the living. Thus, willing certain organs or tissues is permissible and can be considered a *mitzvah*.
- *4.2 Embalming* - According to Jewish tradition, embalming (unless required by civil law) and the use of cosmetics on the deceased are not permitted.
- *4.3 Cremation* - Cremation is not in accordance with the Jewish tradition. Should a family choose cremation, the Rabbi may still choose to officiate. It is encouraged that ashes be interred in a Jewish cemetery and that the urn should have an opening, so the ashes come in contact with the earth.
- *4.4 Ritual cleansing (Taharah)* - Traditionally, the deceased is cleansed according to prescribed ritual as an expression of respect. A group of specially trained persons of the Hevra Kaddisha or a Jewish funeral director should perform the *mitzvah*.
- *4.5 Shroud and burial attire (Tachrichim)* - Jewish law prescribes burial in plain white shrouds (*tachrichim*) so as to demonstrate the equality of all. In addition, there are customs to be buried wearing a *kippah* and one's own *tallit*.
- *4.6 The Casket (Aron)* - To avoid interference with the natural process of “returning to the earth,” Jewish tradition requires that an *aron* be made entirely of wood.
- *4.7 Rending the garment (K'riah)* - Mourners for parents, a spouse, children, or siblings traditionally participate in the rite of *K'riah* (rending of garments), prior to burial. This rite consists of tearing a visible portion of clothing (lapel, pocket, or collar, for example). The torn garment is worn throughout the 7-day mourning period (*shivah*). In many communities the mourner wears a black ribbon. The ribbon is cut in the manner outlined above instead of cutting the garment. Tearing for parents is on the left side (by the heart) and for all other relatives on the right.
- *4.8 Bereaved person (Onen)* - Between the time of death and the funeral, an immediate family member of the deceased is called an *onen*. The *onen* is exempt from the performance of all affirmative religious obligations, such as reciting the three daily services or putting on *tefillin*. At this time the *onen* is not to drink wine, eat meat or indulge in luxuries, outside of Shabbat. The guiding principle is that it is considered a breach of *K'vod Ha-Met* to do anything but attend to the deceased.

#### 5. The Funeral

- *5.1 Services* - Funeral services may be held in the synagogue, in a funeral home, or at the gravesite. The funeral service is usually brief and simple. It usually includes the

recitation of psalms or relevant biblical texts and *El Malei Rachamim* (the traditional memorial prayer), and eulogies honoring the deceased.

- *5.2 Viewing* - Viewing the body (publicly or privately) is contrary to Jewish tradition.
- *5.3 Pall and pallbearers* - At a funeral, the casket may be covered with a cloth, called a pall. Pallbearers (non-immediate family and/or friends selected by the family), accompany or carry the casket to the gravesite.
- *5.4 Carrying the casket* - It is a custom to stop seven times while carrying the casket to the grave. The mourners, family and friends follow the casket as a mark of respect.
- *5.5 Burial* - In traditional practice, the casket is lowered into the earth and the grave is filled. There are varying customs around how to shovel the earth.
- *5.6 Leaving the cemetery* - There is a custom for the mourners to pass between two rows of people in attendance to receive expressions of consolation. After burial, washing one's hands when leaving the cemetery or before entering the house of mourning is also a traditional custom.
- *5.7 Non-Jewish spouse buried in a Jewish cemetery* - Generally, non-Jews are not buried in a Jewish cemetery. The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards has considered several exceptions to this rule. The Rabbi should be consulted on this.

## 6. The Mourning Period

- *6.1 Who is obligated* - Mourners are those whose parent, spouse, child, or sibling has died.
- *6.2 Shivah - Initial period of mourning* - *Shivah* is the seven-day period of intensive mourning observed by the immediate family of the deceased, beginning on the day of the burial. During the *shivah* period mourners are encouraged to stay away from work or school, and to remain at home. It is also a time to contemplate the meaning of life and adjusting to life with the loss of a loved one. Public mourning observances are suspended on Shabbat to honor the sanctity and serenity of Shabbat. Mourners are permitted, and encouraged, to attend Shabbat services; but they are not given an *aliyah*, may not conduct services, and they do not display the *k'riah* ribbon or garment publicly.

During *shivah*, mourners should not deem themselves as hosts in their homes, obligated to attend to their visitors. It is customary for family and friends to arrange for a condolence meal, which traditionally includes round foods such as eggs to symbolize the cycle of life, to be served to the mourners upon their return from the cemetery. It is also customary, for mirrors in the *shivah* home to be covered and for a seven-day memorial candle to be kindled.

Traditionally, each day of *shivah*, the mourner recites *Kaddish* with a *minyan*

(quorum of 10 Jews above 13 years old), preferably in the home of the mourner. On Shabbat, mourners join the synagogue service and receive public condolences.

- *6.3 The first thirty days (Shloshim)* - During the thirty days following burial, after the observance of *shivah*, mourners return to work and activities, but refrain from public entertainment or social activities. The *k'riah* is customarily worn during *shloshim*.
- *6.4 Twelve months: The duration of the mourning* - Mourners for deceased parents recite *Kaddish* for eleven months or a full twelve months (two different customs) from the day of burial. Other mourners often choose to say *Kaddish* during this period as well.
- *6.5 Yahrzeit - Anniversary of death* - The *Kaddish* is recited each year on the Hebrew calendar anniversary of death. It is customary to light a *yahrzeit* (24-hour burning) candle, to study Torah or Rabbinic literature, and to donate *tzedakah*.
- *6.6 Yizkor - Memorial prayers* - The *Yizkor* is recited on Yom Kippur; Shemini Atzeret (the 8<sup>th</sup> day of Sukkot); the eighth day of Passover; and the second day of Shavuot. Some follow the custom of lighting a *yahrzeit* candle on each of these occasions.

## 7. Miscellaneous

- *7.1 Unveiling* - There is no required formal rite. If conducted, it may be anytime after one month has passed. Usually, it happens close to the first *yahrzeit*.
- *7.2 Pre-Planning* - Advance purchase of gravesites is important and appropriate. Providing designated relatives with vital information to direct the decisions and allow the family to follow the Tradition and wishes of the deceased is sensitive and wise. Information for various parties needed on hand at the time of death, includes:
  1. Full name of the deceased.
  2. Hebrew name, Hebrew name of father and mother.
  3. Date of birth and location of birth certificate.
  4. Place of birth.
  5. Mother's maiden name.
  6. Social Security number and where card is kept.
  7. Location of will, legal advisor's telephone number.
  8. Life insurance agent's telephone number.
  9. Life insurance policy numbers and where policies kept.
  10. Location of safe deposit box, key, and who has access.
  11. Bank account numbers - checking and savings and where kept.
  12. Securities information and where securities kept.
  13. Cemetery deed/location.
  14. Real estate and how title is held.
  15. Military service and where discharge papers kept.
  16. Rabbi to be notified.
  17. Funeral home choice.