

Invitation to Judaism – Lesson Plan – Bar Mitzvah/Death

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Reading: Robinson, pp. 182-192, Telushkin, pp. 690-699

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3. Bibliography

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Jewish End-of-Life Practices

Jewish traditions for the end of life include a wealth of practices, both ritual and practical. This document provides a review of those practices as well as guidance about related matters. We'll cover visiting the sick, how to act just before a pending death, what to do just after someone has died, how to treat the body of the dead, when and how to begin mourning, what is a Jewish burial, and how to mourn and remember the dead. These practices include aspects for individuals as well as for the entire community. We are describing general traditional practices, with the understanding that individuals and communities may have different customs.

Visiting the Sick (*bikkur cholim*)

Rabbi Dayle Friedman emphasizes accompanying people: "We walk along with those we serve in the course of their journeys through suffering, illness, change, and joy. Like Miriam, who stood and watched as baby Moses sat in his basket on the banks of the Nile, our greatest gift is sometimes simply being present alongside our people. We join them, at times offering encouragement or concrete help, at other times simply witnessing their endurance, their pain, and with God's help, their resiliency ... We meet the people with whom we work, in the words of the Torah, *ba'asher hu sham* (where he or she is), in whatever they are experiencing, wherever they are..." (From *Jewish Pastoral Care*, 2nd ed., 2005, p. xv).

One aspect of this holy work of visiting those who are ill is coming to terms with our own health challenges and mortality. One of the most helpful ways is to start by trying to understand your personal death awareness by taking a moment and recalling the number of times today you've thought about your own — not someone else's — death or limited span of life. Maybe you thought about your age and evaluated your own progress towards certain life goals. Or perhaps you briefly experienced a fear of dying. Some days you may act and think as if you're going to live forever. The purpose of this exercise is to raise your personal death awareness so that you may begin to perceive an entire range of choices about your life and death that you might not have been aware of.

From this perspective of humble awareness of one's own limitations and mortality, we enter the world of those who are ill, and try as best we can to be there to support them, where they are, as they are, as who they are, while they navigate the challenges facing them. Sometimes just being there, in silence, is enough. Just having an open heart can provide tremendous support. At other times, we might read to a patient or sing to them or pray with them. It depends on where they are and what brings them joy and consolation, and possibly hope. Our human acts of mercy, compassion and empathy make it possible for us to endure, to suffer the sometimes excruciatingly painful limits and losses.

Bikur cholim is an act of simple kindness. It is giving of one's self to aid another who is in need of help. Anything we can do to help lessen the suffering of another is a mitzvah. And, who knows, your visit might be the last bit of comfort this person receives before they die.

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Pending Death, Just After Death

When death is imminent, it is appropriate to include the *vidui* ("confession") prayer in support of the dying person (*goses*). Alison Jordan, RN, MS, MFT, writes, "The *Vidui* provides an opportunity to unburden a heavy heart, return to a sense of hope for wholeness, and to let go of life peacefully. I continue to study the notion of death as atonement. In the meantime death is seen as a natural and G-d given experience to be encountered and met, hopefully in the comforting presence of others. Wholeness of healing is understood not in physical terms, but as redeeming acceptance, reconciliation, and peace." See her website – [Vidui Variations](#)

Rabbi Stuart Kelman writes, "The traditional function of the *vidui* at the end of life is to provide words for the person who is in the process of dying. Our tradition is remarkably silent concerning those who are standing by the bedside. Alison Jordan has defined *vidui* as a prayer of confession to God. The deathbed confessional is said by or for the *goses* (dying person), but another type of *vidui* may be recited by others when addressing God concerning the relationship to the *goses*."

Upon death, as the soul departs, the following is said:

As the soul departs, the following is recited:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל, יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ, יְהוָה אֶחָד.
בְּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מְלֻכּוֹתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד. (ג' פעמים)
יְהוָה הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים. (ז' פעמים)
יְהוָה מֶלֶךְ יְהוָה מֶלֶךְ יְהוָה יְהוָה יְמֻלְךָ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד.

If possible, the last words recited in the presence of the dying person should be the Shema. At the moment of death, those present should say the following:

יְהוָה נָתַן וַיְהוּה לְקַח. יְהוִי שֵׁם יְהוָה מְבָרָךְ מֵעַתָּה וְעַד עוֹלָם.
הַצּוֹר תָּמִים פָּעָלוּ כִּי כָל דְּרָכָיו מִשְׁפָּט,
אֵל אֱמוּנָה וְאֵין עוֹל, צְדִיק וַיִּשָּׂר הוּא.

Translation and transliteration of the passage above:

Hear, O Israel, Adonai is our God, only Adonai.

Blessed is the Name of God's honored Dominion forever. (3 times)

Adonai is God. (7 times)

Adonai rules, Adonai has ruled, Adonai will rule forever.

Sh'ma yisra-eil Adonai eloheinu Adonai echad.

Baruch shem k'vod malchuto l'olam va'ed. (3 times)

Adonai hu ha'elohim. (7 times)

Adonai melech, Adonai malach, Adonai yimloch l'olam va'ed.

If possible, the last words recited in the presence of the dying person should be the *Sh'ma*.

At the moment of death, those present should say the following:

Adonai has given, and Adonai has taken away.

Blessed is the Name of Adonai from now and forever.

The Rock, perfect is God's work, for all God's paths are just; God of faith without iniquity, righteous and fair is God.

Adonai natan v'Adonai lakakh.

Yehi shem Adonai m'vorach mei'atah v'ad olam.

Hatzur tamim pa'alo ki chol d'rachav mishpat, Eil emunah v'ein aveil, tzadik v'yashar hu.

Additional customs:

Jewish law defines a "primary mourner" as a parent, sibling, child, or spouse of the deceased. Traditionally, all primary mourners who are present at the moment of death perform the ritual of *kri'ah* (tearing of a garment) at this point, and continue to wear the torn clothing as mourners. Others who are present in the room at the moment of death also perform the ritual of *kri'ah*, even if they will not be mourners. This could include physicians, nurses, caretakers, visiting friends, relatives, or others.

Primary mourners who are not present traditionally perform *kri'ah* either when they first learn of the death or at the time of the funeral service. (The common current practice is for primary mourners also to perform *kri'ah* at the funeral.)

It is understood that those in the room have been present and have witnessed the moment of transition, and, therefore, have had a direct experience of being in the presence of death. It is customary that those who visit a cemetery wash their hands upon leaving the cemetery because they have been in the presence of death; all the more so for those who witness the actual moment of death. Even the death of a stranger is understood to affect a person, and being a witness to the death is understood to leave the observer vulnerable, at least for a short time. *Kri'ah* marks that vulnerability.

Other customs include:

- Closing the eyes and mouth of the deceased
- Straightening the limbs
- Covering the deceased, often with a sheet
- Placing a candle near the head of the deceased
- Opening the windows in the room (if weather is problematic, windows are opened briefly, then closed again)
- Covering the mirrors (at home – this does not apply in a hospital or other facility)

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Between Death and Burial

There are two areas of interest when we discuss what happens between death and burial: care of the body of the deceased and what mourners should do during this period. This period between the time of death and the burial is called *aninut*.

Mourning Starts

A man who mourns during *aninut* is called an “*onen*”, a women an “*onenet*”. This is when most people feel like they are “in-between”. An individual in this situation has no religious obligations beyond attending to the practical necessities of arranging for the funeral. The Jewish understanding is that an *onen/onenet* is not able to focus on anything other than the immediate issue of the burial, and is not expected to be capable of any ritual observances (and may even be prohibited from doing them), even those that might otherwise be performed on a daily basis (such as reciting *Sh'ma*).

As Rabbi Maurice Lamm has observed: “The *onen* is a person in deep distress, a person yanked out of normal life and abruptly catapulted into the midst of inexpressible grief. He is disoriented, his attitudes are disarrayed, his emotions [are] out of gear. The shock of death paralyzes his consciousness and blocks out all regular patterns of orderly thinking.” (*The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, p. 21).

Indeed, we are discouraged from trying to comfort the mourner prior to the burial. *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers) teaches, “Do not console a person whose deceased relative lies before him” (4:23). Therefore, the common Western customs of viewing the body and visitation are contrary to traditional Jewish practice.

Although an *onen/onenet* is exempt from all positive *mitzvot* (such as reciting the *Amidah*), he/she must observe all the prohibitive laws (for example, not eating non-kosher food). The mourner’s main task is to attend to the details of the burial. Naturally, friends and community members may assist. There is no liturgy assigned for this period.

As for the body of the deceased, there are two main rituals associated with this *aninut* period: *taharah* (preparation of the body for burial) and *shmirah* (“guarding” or “watching” the dead – keeping them company so the soul is not alone).

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The *Taharah* Ritual

In Jewish tradition, we are all holy beings created in the image of the Divine. This means that when we die, our body is considered a holy thing and should be treated with respect and dignity. Jewish tradition also considers the holy spiritual aspect of a human being, the soul, to be eternal, returning to the Divine upon death. So when a person dies, we have a special ritual to prepare the body for burial and at the same time, midwife the soul from this world to the next. This beautiful ritual is called *taharah*, from the Hebrew root having to do with purification. The ritual includes physical washing of the body along with a powerful spiritual liturgy, and a pouring of water, all intended to assist the soul on its journey. For more information about this special ritual, please see the [Taharah and Shmirah page](#).

Also, to better understand this ritual and its context, along with the feelings involved in the performance of this sacred work, see [Jewish Rites of Death: Stories of Beauty and Transformation](#), by Richard A. Light.

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Shmirah: The Ritual of Guarding

Shmirah is the ritual of guarding the deceased’s body; in some ways it can be likened to an honor guard. Some prefer to call it “accompaniment” as we are ensuring that the soul does not feel alone during this time in which it is adjusting to not having a body. It is traditionally done from the time of death until burial. In some communities *shmirah* is not begun until after the *taharah*. It is generally done in shifts, with each person doing the task for a few hours.

A *shomer* watches over the deceased from the time the deceased comes under the responsibility of the *Chevrah Kadisha* until the funeral and burial. In earlier times, the guarding of Jewish bodies was a physical concern, while today it provides comfort to the soul of the deceased and to the grieving families, and allows community members an additional opportunity to participate in *Chevrah Kadisha* activities.

For more details about this holy ritual, please see the [Taharah and Shmirah page](#).

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What is a Jewish Funeral?

The Jewish funeral is known for its simplicity and authenticity. It is the means by which we acknowledge the merits of the deceased in a public forum while honoring them in death. The funeral and burial usually are done together, but often happen in two locations. For a funeral to be considered Jewish, a few key elements are usually present:

- Ritual preparation of the body for burial (*taharah*)
- Rending of mourner's garments (*kri'ah*)
- Honoring of the deceased through eulogy and liturgy (*hesped*)
- Burial of the body in the ground (*k'vurah*)
- Community condolences at the gravesite and at the home of the mourners

In the modern age, funerals might include a memorial service that happens separately from the burial, especially if the burial is limited to close family and the deceased was known throughout a larger community. In such cases, the graveside service might become the official funeral service, followed by burial, and sometime later a memorial service is held for the community.

For a more detailed explanation of Jewish funeral practices see the [Funeral and Burial](#) page.

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Jewish Burial

The Jewish burial includes respect for the deceased as well as the family, aspects of mourning, community support, and simplicity. The basic premise is that we come from dust and will return to dust. Hence, we should be buried into the earth, usually as soon as possible after death.

Over centuries, burial procedures have changed little. The body is ritually prepared for interment, mourners rend their garments, specific prayers and liturgy are recited, the body is placed into the earth, and formal mourning begins.

For a more detailed explanation of Jewish burial practices see the [Funeral and Burial](#) page.

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The First Seven Days after Burial

After the burial, it is customary for the community to provide a meal of condolence (*s'udat havra'ah*) to the mourning family. After the burial, the mourners traditionally return to the home in which they will be sitting *shiva*. A pitcher of water and a cup are placed outside the door of the home. It is customary to wash one's hands by pouring a cup of water

alternatively on both hands three times. As with the shovel at the cemetery, the cup is not passed from person to person.

The meal is prepared by members of the community or the primary mourners. Traditionally, foods include round foods, such as hard-boiled eggs, lentils, and garbanzo beans. The round shape of these foods symbolize the continuous cycle of life. Sharing a meal is an affirmation that life must continue, even in the face of death.

The primary mourners begin formal mourning after burial during a 7-day period called *shiva* (literally, “seven”), an intense period in which they do nothing but mourn. (We speak of a mourner as “sitting *shiva*”.) *Shiva* begins immediately following the burial and lasts for seven days, ending after the morning service on the seventh day. *Shiva* is not observed on the Sabbath or during Jewish holidays.

Jewish tradition offers very specific recommendations for gradual reentry into normal life. During the first week (*shiva*), the mourners are treated with the utmost care and respect. Their needs are met by the community: both physical/logistical needs, such as meals, babysitting, etc., and spiritual and emotional needs. The synagogue or funeral coordinator often assist in this process.

Traditionally, mourners remain at home during *shiva* and a service is held daily (often in the evening) at the home, so that the mourners may recite the *Mourners’ Kaddish* together. Mourners are encouraged to join the congregation on Shabbat to say *Kaddish*. In some communities, services are held in the home both morning and evening. The tradition is that the Mourner’s *Kaddish* is said in the presence of a *minyan* (prayer quorum of ten; plural, *minyanim*), to insure that mourners do not grieve in isolation but are surrounded by members of their community.

The *Mourner’s Kaddish* (in Hebrew, *Kaddish Yatom*, which literally means “Orphan’s *Kaddish*”) does not deal directly with death but speaks of the power and majesty of God. Perhaps the ancient rabbis understood that it is in the face of death that we are most likely to deny the existence of God.

We recite the *Kaddish* to reaffirm our belief. We express our feelings of loss and the hope that God will fill the vacuum that has been created in the world and in our hearts. Some people believe the *Kaddish* is also said for the benefit of the soul of the deceased to help facilitate its journey. After the funeral, it is customary to say *Kaddish* at every service you attend during mourning. Traditionally, *Kaddish* is only said for immediate family, but you may say *Kaddish* for whomever you wish.

In instances where there are very few or no family members, the role of the community becomes central. People are needed to attend *minyanim*, bring meals, help with dishes and other housework, help with childcare and/or pet care, and so on. The *shiva* period gives mourners time to withdraw from the business of the world and begin to integrate and accept their loss. At the close of the *shiva* period, the tradition is that friends or family accompany the mourner for a brief walk (e.g. around the block) to symbolize the start of the mourners’ reentry into the world.

Our tradition emphasizes focusing on memory and things of emotional significance, and on relieving the mourner from focusing on the external world. For this reason there are traditions that the mourner cover mirrors and need not bathe, shave, change clothes or use makeup. The aim of these practices is to de-emphasize externals, and to keep the focus on the spiritual and emotional aspects of loss.

Mourners do not work during the *shiva* period and usually stay at home. During the *shiva* period, mourners also do not participate in parties, concerts, shows, movies, or similar events that are celebratory in nature, nor do they participate in sex during this time. Mourners should focus on their loss in order to be able to gradually heal.

Mourners may sit on low stools or boxes during the *shiva* period as a means of expressing grief. Furthermore, this practice symbolizes the humility and pain of the mourner who is “brought low” by the passing of a loved one. A tall candle traditionally burns in the *shiva* home for seven days as a sign of memorial.

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The First 30 Days after Burial

The next stage of the mourning process is known as *shloshim* (literally, “thirty”). This 30-day period is counted from the day of the funeral (and includes the *shiva* period). Following *shiva*, the mourner generally returns to work during *shloshim* but is still not completely back in the world. This ongoing mourning is expressed by avoiding parties, concerts, and other forms of public entertainment.

The mourner continues to wear the *kri'ah* ribbon during this time.

At the conclusion of *shloshim*, the formal mourning period ends, except for those who are mourning parents. For these mourners, formal mourning, including the recitation of the Mourner’s *Kaddish*, lasts eleven months (or a full year). Some people may wish to mark the end of *shloshim* with a special *minyán*, where the mourner or family members talk about the deceased. Also, any public memorial service is usually held at the conclusion of *shloshim*. The memorial service may include several speakers and music or poetry that might not have been included in the funeral service.

After the completion of *shloshim*, we are required to return to normal activities; we are required by Jewish law to re-engage in life, get back to normal routines, and go on living. This is not only for our own health and welfare, but as a way to honor the life and accomplishments of the dead. We are encouraged to live a life that honors our lost family members, and this requires that we not only mourn but also live fully.

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The First Year after Burial

The period from the end of *shloshim* to the end of the first year after death is a time we are encouraged to get back into life, while honoring our dead on a daily basis through the saying of *Kaddish*. Traditionally, mourners who have lost a parent say *Kaddish* daily for eleven months (or a full year), while mourning for all other relatives ends with the *shloshim*. In modern practice, mourners may recite *Kaddish* for eleven months for other immediate relatives as well.

Mourning is a process that can be complex and difficult for some people, depending on their relationship with the deceased. Here are some guidelines for the mourner's process that take into account human needs for self-acceptance, emotional expression, support from others, and time:

1. Accept your emotions. Realize that grieving can be an emotional roller coaster, involving shock, guilt, denial, panic, anger, and physical symptoms.
2. Express your feelings. A feeling that is denied remains with you and can erupt at inappropriate times. Acknowledging pain is much better for long-term emotional health. Crying is a natural expression of grief for all people – men, women and children.
3. Heal your grief in your own way and in your own time. Ask others to give you this freedom as well.
4. As needed, seek guidance from a counselor, rabbi or chaplain. They can guide you through the healing process in a holistic way.

In addition to burial and mourning practices, there is a traditional obligation to create some form of *matzevah* (“monument”) to mark the site of the grave. The “unveiling” is a formal ceremony following the placement of the *matzevah*.

Customs differ, but the unveiling is generally held after *shloshim* and usually in the month before the first *yahrzeit*. The unveiling service is a relatively recent practice originating in the United States. Technically, a rabbi need not be present, but it is helpful to have an experienced person officiate.

The ceremony is very brief, usually including some psalms and readings, a few words about the deceased, the removal of a covering from the monument, the prayer *El Malei Rachamim*, and, if a *minyan* is present, the Mourner's *Kaddish*. You may ask the rabbi to help you design an appropriate service to mark the occasion. The unveiling reminds us that we will continue to visit the grave on the deceased's *yahrzeit* and during the High Holiday season, and that their memory will always be with us as our life continues.

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Honoring the Memory of Loved Ones

Jewish life is filled with the memory of our lost loved ones. We honor those memories in a variety of ways, but specifically, we include the *Mourners' Kaddish* in special services four

times during the year (called *Yizkor*; literally, “He (G-d) will remember”), and we mark the annual anniversary — the *Yahrzeit* (Yiddish, meaning “year time”) of each death.

Yizkor services are specific memorial services in which we as a community call forth the memory of our lost family members and say specific prayers in addition to the *Mourners’ Kaddish*.

The *yahrzeit*, on the other hand, is a way for individuals to honor their family by marking the day of death at home. Traditionally, we light a 24-hour candle at sundown on the anniversary of the deceased’s death according to the Hebrew calendar. There are no special prayers to be recited when lighting the *yahrzeit* candle. Some people recite appropriate Psalms, some recall fond memories of the deceased. Some people simply take a few moments to reflect on the life of the deceased.

<https://www.jewish-funerals.org/understanding-jewish-practices/jewish-end-of-life-practices/>