

# ***A Guide to the Jewish Funeral***

**Prepared by the Funeral Practices Committee  
Ohr Kodesh Congregation**

8300 Meadowbrook Lane, Chevy Chase, MD 20815  
(301) 589-3880 [www.ohrkodesh.org](http://www.ohrkodesh.org)

Judaism teaches that the human body retains its sanctity even after death because it once held a sacred human life. Our sages compare the sacredness of a body to an impaired Torah scroll. Although no longer usable, it still retains its holiness.

Accordingly, Jewish law and tradition view funeral and mourning practices with profound religious significance. Interment takes place as soon as possible after death; embalming and viewing are avoided; funerals avoid ostentation; family and visitors reflect in dress and deportment the solemnity of the occasion; and flowers and music are inappropriate.

Funerary customs are supervised by Jewish communities through a *chevrah kedisheh*, a holy society, composed of volunteers who aid the bereaved and ensure that appropriate practices are followed. Assisting in the preparation and burial of the body is a *chesed sheJ emet*, a true act of kindness performed without ulterior motive, for the dead cannot repay this service.

When a member of a community dies, it is the community's responsibility lovingly to assist the deceased's family. In this spirit, members of the Ohr Kodesh Funeral Practices Committee are prepared to help families who have suffered a loss. This guide has been prepared as part of the committee's assistance to the congregation's families.

## **FUNERAL ARRANGEMENTS**

Jewish law requires that burial take place as quickly as possible, usually within 24 hours of death. 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 the Sabbath or a holy day. In any case, burial must not be delayed unduly. It is inappropriate to make funeral arrangements on *Shabbat*, but the rabbi or Funeral Practices Committee coordinator should be contacted immediately following *Shabbat*. Such special cases as death by accident or suicide or death of children under 30 days of age should be referred to the rabbi for guidance.

### **SHMIRAH - WATCHING THE BODY**

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 or friends of the deceased. The Funeral Practices Committee will provide *shomrim* for up to two full days (see front page).

### **AUTOPSIES/ORGAN DONATIONS**

The practice of routine autopsy is contrary to Jewish law, since it is viewed as a desecration of the body. In most cases the family can refuse an autopsy. In cases where an autopsy is required by law, it should be

carried out under the supervision of a rabbi who is familiar with the procedures. Rabbi Fishman should be contacted for guidance and for help in arranging for such supervision. Although organ donation may involve some alteration of the body, it is also viewed as an example of *k'vodha-met* by bringing healing to the living. It may be permissible to will certain organs or tissues. However, the rabbi should be consulted in all cases.

### **TAHARAH - RITUAL CLEANSING**

Jewish law requires that the deceased be cleansed according to a prescribed ritual as an expression of respect. Members of a group of especially trained persons, called a *chevrah kadishah* (holy society), are available to perform this *mitzvah*.

### **TACHRICHIM - SHROUD AND BURIAL ATTIRE**

Jewish law prescribes burial in plain white shrouds (*tachrichim*) so as to demonstrate the equality of all. In addition, a Jewish male is customarily buried wearing a *kipa* and his own *talit*. If desired, he may be buried in his *kitte*.

### **EMBALMING**

Jewish tradition does not permit embalming or the use of cosmetics on the deceased. Embalming is not required by civil law.

**CREMATION**

Jewish law does not permit cremation.

**ARON - COFFIN**

In order to avoid interference with the natural

process of "returning to the earth," Jewish tradition requires that a coffin be made entirely of wood, without nails or metal decoration.

**THE FUNERAL****K'RIAH - RENDING OF GARMENTS**

Mourners for parents, spouses, children, and siblings participate in the rite of *k'riah* (rending of garments) usually just prior to the funeral service. This rite consists of tearing a visible portion of clothing (lapel, pocket, or collar, for example). The torn garment is worn throughout the 30-day mourning period (*shloshim*), except on the Sabbath.

**FUNERAL 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 chanting of psalms and *Eil Ma/ei Rachamim* (the memorial prayer) and a *he sped* (eulogy) honoring the deceased. Fraternal ceremonies and instrumental music are not appropriate.

**PALL AND PALLBEARERS**

At a funeral the coffin may be covered with a specially prepared cloth called a pall and is borne from the funeral service to the burial by family or friends (pallbearers) selected by the mourners.

**CONDOLENCE CALLS**

During the period from death until burial the mourner (called an *onen/onenet* during this period) is exempt from performing all religious duties. Condolence calls should be made after the funeral during the *shivah* week except on the Sabbath.

**KOHANIM - PRIESTS**

There are many special provisions concerning the attendance of *kohanim* at a funeral. For details, consult the rabbi.

**VIEWING THE REMAINS**

Viewing the body either publicly or privately is contrary to Jewish tradition.

**FLOWERS**

Flowers are not appropriate. Friends and associates of the deceased who wish to show some concrete expression of condolence should be encouraged to contribute to a charity which was of importance to the deceased.

## BURIAL

### CARRYING THE COFFIN

The pallbearers customarily stop several times while carrying the coffin to the grave. The coffin precedes the mourners, family, and friends as a mark of respect.

### K'VURAH - BURIAL

In traditional practice, the coffin is lowered into the ground and the grave filled, initially using a reversed shovel, until a mound of earth is formed over the

coffin. The *Kaddish* is recited at the grave after *k'vurah* is completed.

### LEAVING THE CEMETERY

It is customary for the mourners to pass between two rows of friends and family who recite the traditional expression of consolation, "May God comfort you among the mourners for Zion and Jerusalem." It is traditional to wash one's hands after leaving the cemetery as an affirmation of life after involvement with death.

## PERIODS OF MOURNING

### SHIVAH - THE FIRST SEVEN DAYS

*Shivah* is the seven-day period of intensive mourning observed by the immediate family of the deceased beginning on the day of burial. The mourners include anyone whose parent, spouse, child, or sibling has died.

During the entire *shivah* period mourners are encouraged to stay away from work or school, to remain at home, and to contemplate the meaning of life and the manner in which adjustment will be made to the death of the beloved. Public mourning observances are suspended on the Sabbath. Mourners attend Sabbath services, but they are not given an *aliyah*, do not conduct the services, and do not display the *k'riah* publicly. A major festival terminates *shivah* (for details consult the rabbi). Since Judaism teaches that the feeling of loss of a human life is not limited to the deceased's family alone, but is shared by the entire community, it is customary at Ohr Kodesh for the name of the deceased to be read at a Sabbath service after the funeral.

It is customary for family and friends to arrange for a condolence meal (which traditionally includes bread and round foods such as eggs) to be served to the mourners when they return from the cemetery. The mourners should not serve as hosts or otherwise entertain their visitors. If requested by the family, the Funeral Practices Committee will arrange this symbolic meal.

It is customary for the mirrors in the *shivah* house to be covered, for the mourners to be provided with lower chairs on which to sit, for a seven-day memorial candle to be kindled, and for the mourners to refrain from wearing leather shoes and from shaving. Conversation should focus on the deceased and on consoling the mourners.

It is also customary for the mourners to participate in morning, afternoon and evening services in the *shivah* home during the seven days, except on the Sabbath, when mourners attend synagogue

services. The mourners conduct these home services, or they may designate others to do so. If requested by the family, the Funeral Practices Committee will assist in arranging daily services.

### SHLOSHIM - THE FIRST THIRTY DAYS

During the thirty days following burial (except *shivah*), mourners return to work and normal activities but refrain from public entertainment or social activities. The *k'rish* is customarily worn during *shloshim*. In place of home services, mourners attend synagogue services daily to recite *Kaddish*.

### SHANAH - THE FIRST YEAR

Mourners for deceased parents continue to attend services daily to recite *Kaddish* for eleven months, and continue to refrain from celebratory activities for a full year.

### Yahrzeit - ANNIVERSARY OF DEATH

The *Kaddish* is recited each year on the anniversary of death (not burial).

### YIZKOR - MEMORIAL PRAYERS

*Yizkor* prayers are recited on *Yom Kippur*, *Sh'mini Atzeret*, *Pesach*, and *Shavuot* and should be recited beginning with the first holy day after death.

### **FUNERAL HOMES**

A local funeral home has contracted with Ohr Kodesh for use of its facilities for authentically Jewish funerals at a predetermined cost.

Some other area funeral homes can provide fully traditional services and equipment if requested to do so.

The Funeral Practices Committee seeks to maintain contractual agreements and cooperative working relationships with other funeral homes. Details will change from time to time and are available from the Ohr Kodesh office or from the Funeral Practices Committee.

### **GENIZAH**

In Jewish tradition sacred Jewish texts that bear God's name and have become damaged or unusable are treated with reverence and respect by being buried. Sometimes texts are buried in a *genizah*, a special burial chamber. Burying sacred scrolls and books with a deceased person is regarded as a special mark of esteem both for the individual who passed away and for the texts.

The Funeral Practices Committee will provide specially prepared and wrapped texts awaiting interment to be buried with loved ones as a special demonstration of love and respect for family members.