

When Death Occurs

A Guide to Jewish Funerals, Burials and Mourning Practices at TI

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.”

**Tifereth Israel Congregation
Washington, DC 20012**

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I. Introduction

Death -- much as we try to deny it -- is part of the cycle of life. As in all other life cycle events, Judaism offers many ritual practices and customs which, tested by centuries of experience, meet the spiritual, emotional, and pragmatic needs of the bereaved family.

Tifereth Israel Congregation stands ready to address these needs. This brochure summarizes Jewish ritual practices and customs surrounding the death of a loved one, outlines the steps members need to take prior to and following a death in the family, and describes the services and support that the congregation provides during such difficult times.

II. Planning: Making Choices, Easing Burdens

None of us is comfortable with the contemplation of death, but its inevitability demands that, to the extent possible, we make appropriate plans. Advance funeral planning will allow those involved to make better-informed and well-considered decisions on a number of important issues with a minimum of stress. In addition, the wishes of a loved one can be taken into account and become part of the overall process. Planning involves the following steps:

- Collecting Family Information
- Choosing a Cemetery and Purchasing Plots
- Creating Legal and Medical Directives

Collecting Family Information. Immediately following a death, the family will need to provide personal information about the deceased for the funeral and legal documents. Members therefore should gather in advance the information listed below for each family member, place it in a known location, and provide a copy to the synagogue:

- Full English name, including a woman's maiden name if different
- Hebrew name: first name in Hebrew and first names in Hebrew, of the father and mother, including designation of Cohen or Levi
- Father's and mother's full English names. Include the mother's maiden name if different
- Place and date of birth
- Citizenship
- Highest level of education completed
- Profession
- Military/veteran status, if any
- Social Security number

Choosing a Cemetery and Purchasing Burial Plots. A burial plot can be purchased after a death occurs. However, it will substantially simplify funeral planning and avoid a great deal of stress if the family has chosen a cemetery in advance and has already purchased burial plots. (See ***VII. Making Burial Arrangements*** for details).

If the family has purchased plots at either of Tifereth Israel's cemeteries, the synagogue office will have a record. If a family has plots at another cemetery, it is helpful to inform the synagogue executive director about this so the information can be kept on file.

Creating Legal and Medical Directives. Members are encouraged to make a number of legal and medical decisions in advance. These can include:

- Wills, including developing a durable general power of attorney.
- Health care directives, which address decisions about withholding extraordinary life-sustaining procedures.
- Organ transplant desires. Organ donations are encouraged and considered a form of saving a life, one of the most important *mitzvot* in Jewish tradition. Members should speak with the rabbi for details.

Early decisions on these matters will provide guidance to help resolve otherwise difficult legal and moral dilemmas families face during terminal illness and immediately following a death. Families who have executed advance directives should inform the synagogue office so that the information is on file.

For additional guidance on legal and medical directives, see the reading list in the **Appendix**.

III. Guiding Philosophy of Funerals at Tifereth Israel

Tifereth Israel conducts funerals according to Jewish tradition, which emphasizes respect for the dignity of the deceased (*met*), speed, and simplicity. Key elements include the following:

- Nothing is done to delay the natural decomposition of the body or to mask the reality of death. Embalming or cosmetic beautification are prohibited.
- The *met* is ritually washed (*taharah*) and dressed in simple white ritual burial garments (*takhrikhim*). Tifereth Israel has separate groups of men and women trained to perform this ritual.
- Once *taharah* is completed, the casket is closed and there is no viewing of the *met*.
- The funeral is held as soon as practicable following the death — preferably the next day, or the day after if the death occurs on a Friday or just prior to a religious holiday, or to accommodate the travel schedules of far-away relatives.
- If the funeral is not at graveside, the *met* is transported immediately after the funeral to a consecrated Jewish cemetery. Burial is in the ground. Jewish law strictly prohibits cremation.
- From the time of death until just before the funeral, to the extent possible, the *met* is accompanied or watched (*sh'mirah*). This is done by a rotation of friends, family members

(other than the immediate mourners) and synagogue members. This is another act of honor toward the *met* to ensure that the body is never left alone. Family members are not told who performed either *taharah* or *sh'mirah*, as these are *mitzvot* done without expectation of recognition or thanks.

- The casket is made of plain, unfinished pine. It is made without nails, metal fittings, or adornments, as part of Judaism's emphasis on simplicity, the equality of all persons and the naturalness of the body's return to the earth.

IV. Making Funeral Arrangements

In Case of a Death, Contact the Synagogue First. Call the office at 202-882-1605, x 101, and ask for either the rabbi or executive director. If you cannot reach someone at the office, or after business hours, call one of the *haverim* (members of the Funeral Practices Committee) below:

Shelly Heller	h: 301-942-1836 w: 202-242-6698
David (Judy) Cohen	h: 301-652-2872
Marcia Goldberg	h: 301-589-0352
Marcia Goggin	h: 301-593-8480 w: 301-754-1963

Any of these congregational contacts will be able to assist the family, answer their questions and concerns, and begin the process of scheduling and planning the funeral. The family should not contact a funeral home first as this can complicate matters.

Funeral Practices Committee Haverim. For all funerals conducted at Tifereth Israel, a *haver* from the Funeral Practices Committee will be assigned to work with the family. The *haver* provides helpful advice and guidance, coordinates with the rabbi and the funeral home, assists in the funeral and burial, and helps the family organize services during the *shivah* period that follows. The intent is to relieve the family of the burden of financial and logistical details at a time of great emotional stress and grief, and ensure the efficient planning and execution of all arrangements.

The *haver* performs a number of critical functions:

- Meets with the family, usually at their home, to begin funeral planning, in consultation with the rabbi, and helps the family determine the date, time and place of the funeral.
- Makes the initial contact with the funeral home and coordinates the transfer of the *met* from the place of death to the funeral home.

- Collects the information for the death certificate.
- Collects the information for the newspaper death notice, forwards it to the funeral home and proofs/corrects a draft of the death notice prior to final publication.
- Contacts the appropriate synagogue members to schedule *taharah* and recruits members to perform *sh'mirah*.
- Helps the family make burial arrangements and, if the burial is at a Tifereth Israel cemetery, alerts synagogue staff.
- Helps the family organize pallbearers.
- Helps the family arrange for a post-funeral meal.
- Coordinates *shivah* services with the rabbi and executive director and arranges for prayer books and *kippot* to be delivered to the home.
- Arranges for limousine transportation, if the family desires, for mourners and/or other family members to the funeral, cemetery and home.
- Greets and assists the family at the funeral service, and works with the funeral home staff at the funeral and the burial to facilitate logistics.
- If the funeral or burial is held out of the Washington metropolitan area, works with the family and funeral home to make travel and transportation arrangements.

Contract Funeral Package. Tifereth Israel is the founding synagogue and a participating member of the Jewish Funeral Practices Committee of Greater Washington (JFPCGW). This organization contracts with local funeral homes to provide a basic funeral package, in accordance with traditional Jewish practice, for a low, fixed-price arrangement that is several thousand dollars less than that charged by other funeral homes.

JFPCGW contracts with two funeral home: **Hines-Rinaldi Funeral Home** in Silver Spring, serving DC and Maryland; and **Jefferson Funeral Chapel** in Alexandria, serving Virginia. Hines-Rinaldi manages all funerals conducted at Tifereth Israel. The current Hines-Rinaldi contract price, which is periodically adjusted upward by a cost-of-living percentage, can be found in the **Appendix**. The contract funeral provides for the following:

- Removal of the *met* from the place of death to the funeral home.
- Securing a signed copy of the physician's death certificate.
- Refrigeration as required.
- An all-wood pine casket.
- Use of the funeral home's premises, 24 hours per day, for *taharah* and *sh'mirah*, until the funeral and burial.
- All necessary facilities, supplies and equipment, including *takhrikhim* and protective equipment for those performing *taharah*, and a separate lounge area adjacent to the *taharah* facility for *shomrim*.
- Use of the funeral home chapel for a funeral service when desired by the family.
- Transporting the *met* to the funeral service at Tifereth Israel, and then to the cemetery, or, if the funeral is at graveside, directly to the cemetery.
- Arranging for newspaper death notices and preparing and delivering death certificates.
- Guest register books, 50 acknowledgement cards, and a *shivah* candle.

Additional charges, not covered by the contract price, include:

- Newspaper charges for printing the death notice.
- Certified copies of the death certificate.
- Limousine service.
- Mileage charges for transporting the *met* beyond 40 miles from the Washington Beltway.

If the *met* is transported to another community for the funeral service, the contract price is substantially reduced, but charges for transportation 40 miles beyond the Beltway limit are incurred. The complete contract can be found at the JFPCGW website: jewish-funerals.org/aboutus.htm.

The contract funeral package relieves the family of the burden of making logistical and financial arrangements. The family is not required to sign any contracts or to make a trip to the funeral home, unless they wish to view the *met* prior to *taharah*, or hold the funeral at the funeral home.

Tifereth Israel signs all necessary paperwork regarding the funeral, and pays the bill for the contract services. There is no charge for the services of the rabbi, *haverim* or congregants performing *taharah* and *sh'mirah*. Following the *Sh'loshim* period (see **VI. Mourning Rituals**) it is customary for the family to make a tax-deductible contribution to the synagogue.

Please Note: Families may use a funeral home of their choice, but if they do, they must make their own arrangements. They will not receive the services of the congregation's *haverim*, nor may the funeral service be held at Tifereth Israel.

Cemetery Arrangements. If the burial is at either of Tifereth Israel's cemeteries, but the family has not purchased a plot, the synagogue staff can aid with a purchase.

If the family has a plot in a Tifereth Israel cemetery, but has not provided for the opening, closing or a grave liner, the staff can work with the cemetery for the family. (See **VII. Making Burial Arrangements**, for details).

If burial is a cemetery other than one of Tifereth Israel's, the family will have to make its own arrangements with the cemetery to purchase a plot, arrange for burial, or make payments.

V. Funeral and Burial Services

Funeral Service. The funeral home will transport the *met* to the synagogue before the funeral service, or to the cemetery if the funeral is at graveside. The casket, draped with a pall, is placed in the front of the sanctuary. Guest register books will be at the Juniper and 16th Street entrances to the sanctuary. The *haver* will also be present to greet mourners and assist funeral home staff to usher guests into the sanctuary.

The immediate family members arrive 30-60 minutes prior to the service. Before the service, they meet privately with the rabbi to receive additional guidance and instructions, and to perform

k'riyah, the traditional tearing of a garment or black ribbon as an expression of mourning. Other visitors are requested not to visit the family prior to the funeral service.

The funeral service itself is simple and brief, lasting about half an hour. It consists primarily of readings from Ecclesiastes and Psalms, followed by eulogies delivered by the rabbi and, if the family chooses, two or three family members or friends. The service concludes with the chanting of the 23rd Psalm and the *El Malei Rahamim* (God, full of compassion) prayer.

At the conclusion of the service, the pallbearers take the casket from the sanctuary to the hearse. When the burial is at a local cemetery, it is customary for those going to the burial to follow the hearse in a procession.

Burial Service. When the hearse and mourners arrive at the cemetery, the pallbearers, accompanied by the mourners and led by the rabbi, carry the casket to the gravesite. They usually pause seven times on the way to the gravesite as a sign of respect for the deceased. The rabbi recites Psalm 91, which speaks of God's sheltering presence. All others follow this procession.

When the casket is lowered into the ground, the immediate family members, followed by relatives, friends and others, shovel earth onto the casket until it is covered.

The mourners then recite the *Kaddish* for the first time and the burial service concludes with another recitation of the *El Malei Rahamim*. Relatives and friends form two parallel lines from the grave back to their limousines and cars. The mourners walk between the lines, receiving condolences from those on either side, before proceeding to the *shivah* home.

Mourners return from the burial to the home of the deceased or of one of the immediate family. Traditionally, they wash their hands before entering the home, although it is the custom of some to wash their hands before leaving the cemetery. Once home, the mourners partake of a meal, usually dairy or *pareve*, that has been pre-arranged by family and friends.

VI. Mourning Rituals

Mourning Periods. In Jewish tradition, mourning is divided into two periods:

Aninut is the very short period between death and burial when the immediate family members (parent, child, sibling, or spouse of the *met*) are not yet officially considered mourners. During *Aninut* the family is relieved of all ritual obligations. This is in recognition of the shock and disorientation that the family experiences at this time. This allows them to begin to come to terms with their loss and to make the necessary plans for the funeral and burial.

Aveilut is the much longer period which follows burial. *Aveilut*, in turn, is divided into two or three periods, depending on whether the deceased was a spouse, sibling or child, or a parent. These periods are:

1. **Shivah**, which means seven, is traditionally observed for seven days beginning with the day of burial. During this period, the mourners remain at home and refrain from normal activities. Friends are encouraged to visit them and bring prepared dishes or meals. A seven-day memorial candle is burned and services are held in the home at least every evening, if not in the morning as well, conducted by family members, the rabbi or other congregants. At each service, the mourners say *Kaddish*.

Traditionally, mourners sit on low stools and men do not shave as symbols of mourning. Some mourners also do not wear leather. Mourners should not consider themselves as hosts, and are not expected to entertain or feed the guests who come to comfort them. Visitors should be sensitive to adjust the length of their stay to the needs of the mourners.

Shivah is interrupted by Shabbat and minor holidays such as Purim, but resumes afterward. *Shivah* is ended by the High Holidays or a major festival, and does not resume afterward.

2. **Sh'loshim**, which means 30, is the remainder of the first month following burial. During this period, mourners customarily continue to say *Kaddish* and refrain from major social activities and festive events, but return to work and their usual daily routines.

Mourners refrain from shaving, as a sign that they are still recently bereaved. Following the end of *Sh'loshim*, mourners resume essentially all normal activities of life. Mourners should consult with the rabbi for details.

After *Sh'loshim*, mourners whose spouse, sibling, or child has died are no longer required to say *Kaddish*, although some continue to do so for longer periods. *Sh'loshim* is ended by the occurrence of the High Holidays or a major festival.

3. **Shanah**, which means year, is an additional 11 months of mourning beyond *Sh'loshim*, observed only when a parent has died. Mourners say *Kaddish* for another 10 months, a total of 11 months. During the full 12 months, they continue to refrain from joyful activities.

Other significant mourning rituals are:

Yizkor are memorial prayers, concluding with *Kaddish*. These are recited in the synagogue each year on Yom Kippur, Sh'mini Atzeret, the eighth day of Pesah, and the second day of Shavuot. A 24-hour memorial candle is lit in the home at sundown on each of these days. It is customary to make contributions to the synagogue or other charitable organizations at these times.

Cemetery Visit. Each year, a week or so before Rosh Hashanah, families traditionally visit the cemetery. Most synagogues typically schedule memorial services, although not formally *Yizkor*, on a Sunday morning at this time of year. Tifereth Israel holds its service annually at Mount Lebanon Cemetery.

Yahrtzeit. On the anniversary (*yahrtzeit*) of the deceased's death – calculated by the Jewish calendar – *Kaddish* is recited and a 24-hour memorial candle is lit in the home at sundown. Contributions to the synagogue or to other charitable organizations are customarily made in the deceased's memory.

Each year, a month or more prior to the *yahrtzeit*, the synagogue mails a notice to the family informing them of the date when the *yahrtzeit* falls, and at which Friday evening and Shabbat morning services the deceased's name will be read in the synagogue.

Memorial Stones and Markers. During the year following burial, a memorial marker is placed on the grave. This may be done any time after the first 30 days. Some families choose to wait until the first anniversary of the death. The unveiling of the marker may be an occasion for the family to assemble at the gravesite, speak of the deceased and their memories, and recite *Kaddish* and *El Malei Rahamim*.

Families can purchase a marker either from the cemetery or from a local monument dealer. The synagogue staff can assist with this.

Memorial Plaques. Families may wish to remember their family member by purchasing a memorial plaque. These bronze plaques are mounted on the rear wall of the Tifereth Israel sanctuary, and are lit on the individual's *yahrtzeit* and the four times each year when *Yizkor* is recited.

VII. Making Burial Arrangements

Tifereth Israel Cemeteries. Tifereth Israel owns sections in two Washington-area cemeteries. The congregation's Cemetery Trustees oversee both sites.

Elesavetgrad Cemetery Association is located at 5233 15th Place (at Congress Place), SE, Washington, DC. This is the congregation's older site with about 700 burials dating back to 1921. Few congregants have been buried at this site in recent years.

Mount Lebanon Cemetery is located at 9500 Riggs Road in Adelphi, MD, about a 20-minute drive from the synagogue. Tifereth Israel purchased Section 88 in the late 1940s. It contains about 2,000 burial plots. Most Tifereth Israel burials are at Mt. Lebanon.

Other Washington-Area Cemeteries. There are several other Washington-area Jewish cemeteries. Among the largest of these cemeteries are:

- Garden of Remembrance (*Gan Zikaron*) Memorial Park in Clarksburg, MD.
- Judean Memorial Gardens in Olney, MD
- King David Memorial Gardens in Falls Church, VA
- Menorah Gardens Cemetery in Rockville, MD
- National Capitol Hebrew Cemetery in Capitol Heights, MD

Out-of-Town Cemeteries. For information about Jewish cemeteries located in North America, go to jewishgen.org/cemetery/northamerica.

Purchasing Cemetery Plots. Tifereth Israel's office manages its cemetery sales. Sales are open to both members and non-members. The current price schedule is listed in the **Appendix**. To purchase a plot, call the Tifereth Israel office. Staff will work with a family to determine preferences regarding:

- Choice of cemetery.
- Number and location of plots and proximity to relatives.
- Visits to the cemetery to inspect potential sites.

Payment can be made in a lump sum or over time. Once a purchaser has paid in full for a burial plot, the office sends a letter to the cemetery, informing it of the sale, location and owner's name.

The cemetery, in turn, issues a title to the purchaser as evidence of the owner's *right to bury* in that plot. The cemetery then charges the purchaser a title transfer fee. One fee covers transfer of up to six plots purchased at the same time by an owner.

Plot owners should keep the cemetery up to date with current contact information. Plot owners pay the cemetery directly for liners, if required, and for openings and closings – that is, the digging and filling in of a grave. Tifereth Israel encourages plot owners to purchase these services or items when choosing a plot to minimize complications at the time of death. The office provides advice and help for purchases at its cemeteries.

Families choosing to purchase plots at a cemetery other than Tifereth Israel's will need to contact that cemetery directly for any arrangements.