

Jewish Traditions Concerning Death & Mourning

Burial Practices

- Judaism holds that the body is a holy vessel into which the soul is placed, and the body retains its essential holiness even when death occurs. Therefore we treat the body (*met* for a man, *meta* for a woman) with dignity and respect after death has occurred. We show respect by never leaving the *met/a* unattended (*shmira*), by providing ritual washing and dressing (*tahara*), and by burying the *met/a* as quickly as possible in a simple wooden casket. Embalming and open-casket viewings are counter to traditional Jewish practice, as is cremation; however, the *Chevra Kavod haMet* will provide *tahara* prior to cremation if the family desires it. *Tahara* can generally be provided following certain types of organ and tissue donation.
- The *Chevra Kadisha* (Holy Society) cares for the deceased, usually in conjunction with a local funeral home.
- In the Portland metropolitan area, the trained men and women of the *Chevra Kavod haMet* (Society for Honoring the Dead) serve the diverse Jewish community, including the unaffiliated, with respect for the human dignity of the deceased.
- The *Portland Hevra* cares for the Orthodox community.
- Members of the *Chevra Kavod haMet* are volunteers, and provide *tahara* (ritual washing and dressing of the *met/a*), and *shmira* (guarding the *met/a*) from the time of *tahara* until the funeral. Men provide this service for men, and women provide this service for women.
- *Tahara* is usually performed at the funeral home. The entire ritual takes about an hour. The *met/a* is ritually washed, then clothed in simple white cotton or linen clothing consisting of pants (the feet are closed, like footie pajamas), shirt, tunic, belt and head covering. The garb is the same for men and women, with the exception of the head covering. Men (and women who so choose) are buried with a *tallit*, or prayer shawl. After the *met/a* is dressed, a wrapping cloth is used, like a large sheet, to completely swaddle the body. Traditionally nothing is buried with the individual, but exceptions are occasionally made for small objects that are emotionally significant to the *met/a*, or are of biodegradable material (for example, a Mason's apron or ring, a pocket flag, or a set of *t'fillin*). Family members are not allowed to participate in or observe the *tahara*, in order to protect the mourners' memory of their loved one.
- Because Jewish tradition encourages a speedy return of the body to the earth, metal caskets are not used, nor is metal or plastic hardware used on traditional wooden caskets. Tradition emphasizes that all human beings are equal in death as in life, so the preference is for the simplest and least expensive casket made entirely of wood, or no casket at all.
- *Shmira*, the watching or guarding of the *met/a*, traditionally takes place from the moment of death until burial. In modern times this can sometimes present a challenge, as people no longer die at home and burial is often delayed while family gathers from across the globe. If family and friends are prepared to comfort the soul of the *met/a* and the primary mourners in this manner, the *Chevra Kavod haMet* can provide instruction for *shomrim* in how to sit *shmira* from the time of death until the *tahara* takes place, and will provide *shomrim* from the time of *tahara* until the time of burial, as requested. Families can arrange to hire a *shomer* for a fee, if they so desire.

Post Funeral Practices

- The *shiva* period usually extends from the time of burial through the seventh day, unless interrupted by a holiday or *Shabbat*. During this intense period of mourning the family remains at home, refrains from work, and observes certain rituals, including the *shiva minyan*. This evening prayer service is usually conducted by clergy, but can also be lay-led. It gives the community an opportunity to express comfort and caring to the grieving family.
- Following the *shiva* period, the primary mourners (those mourning the death of a parent, spouse, sibling or offspring) observe a period of less-intense mourning known as *shloshim*. During this thirty-day period it is traditional to attend prayer service at least once a day so that the Mourner's Kaddish may be recited. Additionally, mourners may choose to refrain from celebrations during this period, including attendance at concerts or movies. For those mourning the loss of a parent, the recitation of the Mourner's Kaddish is observed for 11 months.
- On each anniversary of death, called *Yahrzeit*, it is traditional to light a memorial candle and attend prayer service so that the Mourner's Kaddish can be recited. The recitation of the Mourner's Kaddish is also performed during Yizkor service at the end of Pesach, Sukkot and Shavuot, as well as on Yom Kippur.

What to do when a death occurs:

- If the person is a member of a congregation, please call that congregation so that clergy can be informed. They will then help guide you through the process.
- If the person is unaffiliated, please contact the Jewish Federation; www.jewishportland.org; 503-245-6219; 6680 SW Capitol Hwy, Portland, OR 97219.
- The Federation houses *Chesed Shel Emet*, which provides indigent burial services for those in the Jewish community in need. Please contact Jemi Kostiner Mansfield, administrator, 503-535-4038, for more information.
- Most Jewish burials in the Portland metropolitan area are done through Holman's Funeral Service, www.homansfuneralservice.com; 503-232-5131; 2610 SE Hawthorne Blvd, Portland, OR 97214. Some Jewish burials are also done at Riverview Cemetery; www.riverviewcemetery.org or www.riverviewcemeteryfuneralhome.com; contact Gary Sands at 503-246-6488.
- The *Chevra Kavod haMet* serves any Jew in the Portland metropolitan area (and beyond) with the exception of the Orthodox community, which is served by their own Chevra. The services of the *Chevra Kavod haMet* are available to any Jew at any funeral home upon request. Please visit our website, www.chevrakavodhamet.org for more information about our services and traditional Jewish burial practices. You may contact our coordinator, who will respond within 24 hours, at chevrakavodhamet@gmail.com.
- Oregon Board of Rabbis can help find an officiant for a funeral; email them at: lscord@comcast.net