



Beth El Synagogue
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A Guide to Jewish Funeral Practices

Each of us must inevitably face the reality of death, either the loss of a loved one or our own mortality. We all have to make difficult decisions and confront difficult issues that reflect our humanity and test our faith.

The Jewish traditions associated with death and mourning not only speak to the preciousness of life, but are intended to help us in a loving way when we are feeling weak, afraid, bereft, and vulnerable. These time-tested observances help to calm us and heal us, enabling us to make the necessary adjustments to separation and loss.

Our sages regarded every life as endowed with unique holiness. Thus the body, which is the vessel containing life, is to be treated with great sanctity. Each observance associated with burial emphasizes a significant element of our faith as family, congregation, and community coalesce to help the individual mourner.

Judaism emphasizes dignity and simplicity. It avoids ostentation and disguise. It regards death as the great equalizer returning us to the bosom of the earth. Those things which interrupt the natural process or which deny the reality of death are to be avoided. From the moment that the arrangements are begun, through the preparation of the body by the *chevra kadisha*, to the burial itself and subsequent shiva, everything is to be attended to with *kvod hamet*, respect, dignity, and kindness.

When a member of a family dies, every member of the community is touched by the loss. It's through the traditions and the community that we gain solace and we ease our pain. This guide is intended to assist us so that we will know what to expect and what to do when we experience a loss.

When Death Occurs

When a death occurs, coping is easier if you know what to do next. This checklist might be helpful.

1. Contact the synagogue 402-492-8550 (or Allison Newfeld at 1-908-337-3674 after-hours) to assist you in making arrangements. If you have had no prior planned agreement, you could ease the strain of making funeral arrangements by having a close friend aid you.
2. If you are using the Jewish Funeral Home, be in touch with Mary Sue Grossman at 402-556-6288 to arrange for proper care of the deceased.
3. In coordination with Rabbi Abraham, decide on the time and place of the service. Decide whether the service will take place at the Beth El Cemetery Chapel or graveside. Contact immediate family, close friends, and employer or business colleagues.
4. Write the obituary (Beth El can offer examples if you need). You might include age, place of birth, cause of death, occupation, college degrees, memberships held in professional, social or religious organizations, military service, noteworthy achievements, and list of survivors in the immediate family.
5. Give the time and place of service. Suggest memorial gifts be given and request no flowers be sent.
6. Choose an appropriate memorial to which gifts may be sent. You may establish a named endowment fund at the synagogue in memory of the departed or designate an existing fund for contributions. As well, Jewish educational or welfare institutions and medical research institutions are all appropriate causes for donations.
7. Discuss the eulogy with Rabbi Abraham, including which family members or friends would you like to speak.

Funeral Homes

The Jewish Funeral Home

4415 Cuming Street, Omaha, NE 68131-1015
(402) 556-6288

John A. Gentleman Mortuaries

1010 North 72nd Street, Omaha, NE 68114
14151 Pacific Street, Omaha, NE 68134
Phone - (402) 391-1664
Email - office@johnagentleman.com

Heafey Hoffmann Dworak Cutler Mortuaries

7805 West Center Road
Omaha, NE 68124
(402) 391-3900

From the Time of Death to the Funeral

Who is a mourner?

Mourners are those who are immediately related to the deceased - mother, father, sister, brother, husband, wife and child. From the moment of death until the burial, each of these immediate relatives is considered an onen. The onen has no religious obligation except to attend to the practical necessities of arranging for the funeral. Once burial has occurred, the seven immediate relatives are considered mourners.

What are the preparations for burial?

Tahara - Cleansing the body, tahara, is a mitzvah performed by the chevra kadisha, the Burial Society. Tahara is considered a ritual act of purification.

Tachrichim - After the body is cleansed and tahara has been performed, it is dressed in shrouds, tachrichim, made of white cotton or linen. For those who wish, a tallit with the fringes cut, to show that it will no longer be used, is draped over the body. Earth from Israel is sprinkled in the coffin as a way of connecting the deceased to the holy soil of Eretz Israel. Broken shards, symbolizing the fragility of life, are laid over the deceased's eyes.

Shmira - Tradition encourages, as an act of great respect, that a body is not left alone from the time of death until burial. This practice of sitting with the deceased, shmira, may be performed by family, friends, or members of the community.

Aron - The coffin, aron, like the shrouds, should be simple and unadorned. Reflecting the Jewish belief that we are all equal in the face of death, the aron is made entirely of wood, without ornate carving, nails, or metal decoration.

How does Jewish Tradition regard civil procedures related to death?

Autopsies - Tradition frowns on autopsies unless required by civil law or for immediate medical benefit. Questions about autopsies should be referred to the Rabbi.

Organ Donations- In keeping with the mitzvah of saving a life, organ donations for immediate use are encouraged. Specific questions about organ donations should be referred to the Rabbi.

Embalming and Cremation - Because of their pagan roots, both embalming and cremation are discouraged by Jewish law. Embalming is not required by civil law.

Funeral Service and Burial

When does the funeral take place?

The funeral and burial are held as soon as possible after death. Judaism considers prompt burial a matter of respect to the deceased. In addition, prolonging burial adds to the strain experienced by the bereaved. In special circumstances, for instance, when family members are not immediately available to attend the funeral, postponement is acceptable.

Where is the funeral service held?

Jewish funeral services, which are characterized by simplicity and brevity, may be conducted at the Beth El Cemetery Chapel or gravesite.

Honoring the dead and helping the bereaved are significant mitzvot.

What happens at the funeral service?

Kriah - Before the service begins, the mourners gather together with the Rabbi to perform kriah, rending a garment. Kriah is an ancient tradition, which can be traced to biblical times. The custom today is to cut a black ribbon that children of the deceased wear on the left side over the heart and all other mourners wear on the right. During this ritual, mourners stand to signify strength at the time of grief, and they recite a prayer acknowledging the inevitability of death.

Service - The bereaved family is seated at the front of the synagogue or chapel. The closed coffin remains in view covered by a pall. Flowers, a symbol of life and celebration, are not customary. The service includes psalms and inspirational readings. The eulogy is intended to highlight the enduring qualities of the deceased. The service ends with the Eyl Malei Rahamim prayer, "God Full of Compassion," which expresses the hope that the deceased will be granted eternal peace.

Pallbearers - At the end of the service, the coffin is moved from the synagogue or chapel to the hearse by pallbearers designated by the family. As a sign of respect, the coffin precedes the mourners. At least six pallbearers are required to lift the coffin into the hearse and to carry it to the grave at the cemetery. Honorary pallbearers may also be assigned. Mourners do not serve as pallbearers.

Should children attend?

The presence of children at a funeral is ultimately a family decision.

What traditions are observed at the burial?

The burial service is simple, consisting of psalms, the chanting of the Eyl Malei Rachamim prayer and the recitation of the kaddish. Traditionally, the casket was lowered and covered with earth before the mourners left the cemetery.

Mourning

What home rituals are observed by mourners upon returning from the cemetery?

Hand washing- Before entering the home, mourners and those who have been to the cemetery customarily pour water on their hands as a symbolic act of purification. Alternatively, this practice may be performed at the cemetery.

Meal of Consolation - Mourners do not need to act as hosts or to entertain people after the funeral. Customarily, family or friends prepare a light dairy meal and serve it to the mourners. Since eggs are one of the few substances that become harder when subjected to heat, hard boiled eggs are included as a symbol of strength.

What is the kaddish?

An ancient prose poem, the kaddish praises God for life and anticipates peace on earth. It has five variations; one is the mourner's kaddish intended as a statement of faith at a time when we feel most threatened and fragmented. Mourners recite the kaddish throughout the mourning period.

How long is the mourning period?

Shiva - The first seven-day period after death, called shiva, is a time of intensive mourning. During shiva, the kaddish is said daily at home in the presence of a minyan. Mourners are encouraged to refrain from work and other routine activities and to remain at home so that friends, family, neighbors and colleagues can visit to offer comfort. Shiva ends on the morning of the seventh day after burial.

Shabbat is counted as part of the shiva although the public rituals, such as sitting on a low stool or wearing a kriaah ribbon, are not observed. The Festivals affect shiva in several ways. Please consult the Rabbis.

Shloshim - The first thirty-day period of mourning after burial is called shloshim. All mourners recite the kaddish and refrain from public acts of joy. Children who have lost a parent continue to mourn for a year and say kaddish for 11 months and one day. For all other mourners, the official mourning period ends at the conclusion of shloshim.

Yahrzeit- The anniversary of a death, yahrzeit, is observed each year by reciting kaddish at the synagogue, lighting a memorial lamp at home, and giving tzedakah in memory of the deceased.

Memorials

How do Jews memorialize the dead?

Jewish tradition provides several ways for memorializing the dead.

Yizkor- Memorial prayers, yizkor, are recited as a congregation four times a year: on Yom Kippur and on the three major festivals, SheminiAtzeret, which comes at the end of Sukkot, the last day of Pesach, and the second day of Shavuot.

Gravestones- Jewish law requires that a grave be marked, but neither the type of marker nor the inscription itself is specified. Cemeteries have varying requirements about size and placement of such markers. Inscriptions usually include the name of the deceased in Hebrew and in English as well as the date of birth and date of death. Sometimes other information is noted or a quotation about the person is added. Many end with five Hebrew letters, which are an abbreviation for the phrase t'hee nishmato/nishmata tzrura b'tzor hechaim, "may his/her soul be bound up in the bond of life."

Unveiling- This ceremony, which is not required by Jewish law, has come to include the recitation of a few psalms, the chanting of Eyl Malei Rachamim, the mourner's kaddish, and a few words spoken about the deceased. It may be held any time after the thirty days from the day of the funeral. Family members themselves often conduct these simple services.

Synagogue Plaques- Beth El Synagogue has memorial boards outside the Sanctuary displaying plaques with the names of many deceased members. Arrangements for the purchase of these plaques may be made through the synagogue office.

Selected Readings

Books and articles that offer fuller discussion of Jewish bereavement and funeral traditions:

The Jewish Mourners Handbook (West Orange, New Jersey: Behrman House).

Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* (New York: Jonathan David Publishers) 1969.

Ron Wolfson, *A Time to Mourn a Time to Comfort* (Philadelphia: Jewish Lights Publishing) 1996.

Books that can be a source of comfort:

Sidney Greenberg, ed., *A Treasury of Comfort*, (North Hollywood, California: Wilshire Books) 1970.

Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken Books) 1981.

Jack Reimer, ed., *Jewish Reflections on Death* (New York: Schocken Books) 1974.