

# A Guide for Mourners

Judaism can enrich our lives in times of sadness as well as in times of joy. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Jewish approach to death and mourning. Imbued with psychological insight, Judaism provides mourners with a unique source of guidance and emotional support. This page contains halakhot and minhagim (laws and customs) developed to bring honor to the deceased and comfort to the bereaved. It is our hope that this brief overview will reveal some of the wisdom and beauty of Jewish tradition as well as our sense of commitment to that tradition as a Conservative synagogue. We as a community have pledged to come together to bring comfort to all those in need. The Bereavement Committee, together with our Rabbi, are here to extend as much support and assistance as possible to our members during a time of mourning.

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## Who Must Mourn?

When a parent, spouse, sibling or child dies the immediate family members of the deceased become aveilim (mourners). The Jewish approach to mourning temporarily removes mourners from the everyday world, allowing them to come to terms with their loss, and then gradually brings them back to normalcy.

## Stages of Mourning

*Aninut* is the name of the first stage of mourning. It extends from the time of death until burial. During *aninut*, the mourner is relieved of all other religious obligations and devotes his/her time to funeral preparations. As a sign of mourning, a person in *aninut* does not eat meat, drink wine or engage in conjugal relations, except on Shabbat. *Shivah* begins immediately after burial and lasts seven days (the day of the funeral counts as the first full day and *shivah* concludes after only an hour on the morning of the seventh day). During *shivah*, mourners remain at home, away from business and other concerns. It is a time for contemplation, a time for remembering, a time for accepting the finality of death and the ultimate significance of life.

*Shloshim* is the next stage of mourning and concludes thirty days after the date of burial. This constitutes the full period of mourning for all relatives other than parents. Mourners resume most of their usual activities of daily life. However, joyous events and entertainment are prohibited. Kaddish is recited during shloshim.

Twelve Hebrew months is the extended period of mourning for those who are mourning a parent. All of the restrictions of shloshim continue during this time. Kaddish is recited for eleven Hebrew months – only for a parent.

It is true that we never fully recover from the loss of a close relative, but we are encouraged to move on with our lives. Observing Jewish tradition helps us do this, step by step.

### **Preparing for the Funeral**

It is the mourners' obligation during *aninut* to see to the proper burial of their loved one. According to Jewish law, burial must take place as soon as possible – usually within a day or two. Where delay is unavoidable, it should be kept to a minimum. To make the difficult task of arranging a funeral as easy as possible, it is best to contact the Rabbi and the Bereavement Committee before making any arrangements. We are willing to assist you in making all necessary preparations for the funeral. At your request, a member of the Bereavement Committee is available to accompany you to the funeral home when you meet with a Funeral Director. You will need to set the time of the funeral with the Rabbi and make an appointment to talk about the service. Burial plots in our synagogue's section of Beth David Cemetery in Elmont, NY are also available.

### *Kevod HaMet* - Respect for the Dead

Our care for a body after death reflects our devotion to a person in life, and our reverence for God who gave that life. This is a principle which has important implications for Jewish funeral practice.

*Autopsy* — The body of the deceased should be treated with the utmost care. Therefore, autopsy is prohibited unless it is required by the civil authorities or unless it has been determined that an autopsy will help save a life. If an autopsy is necessary, the Medical Examiner should be asked to conduct the autopsy with respect for Jewish Law.

*Organ Donation* — Organ Donation for healing purposes is permitted by Jewish law and should be encouraged. Some patients may be waiting years for an organ transplant and many die. Through organ donation it is possible to save the lives of several people. There can be no greater *kevod hamet* than using death as an opportunity to preserve life. Surviving family members must agree to donate organs. As with all medical directives, this is something that ought to be discussed in advance.

*Shomrim* — Out of love and concern for the deceased, we do not leave the body unattended. *Shomrim* – guardians – should be appointed to stay with the person who died and to recite Psalms or to study until the time of the funeral. It is a singular honor to be asked to serve as a

shomer. It is the goal of the Bereavement Committee to include family, friends and other members of the congregation to sit together in pairs as shomrim. Where necessary, the Funeral Director can help make arrangements for additional shomrim.

*Taharah* — It is proper that taharah (ritual washing/purification) be done. During the taharah the body is cleaned and dressed by a Chevrah Kaddishah (holy burial society) instead of employees of the funeral home. This insures that proper modesty and respect for the deceased will be maintained and that the person will be treated with a sense of holiness and dignity. In the Chevrah Kaddishah men attend to men and women attend to women.

*Tachrichim* – The body is to be dressed in tachrichim (a simple linen garment or shroud) rather than in clothes. Our Rabbis taught that rich and poor alike are dressed in the same simple white garments, for in death we are all equal before God. A person should also be buried in the tallit that he/she wore in life, after one of the tzitzit (corner fringes) has been removed.

*The Aron* – It is by using a plain wooden aron (coffin) that we express our respect for our tradition and for the deceased. A simple wooden aron is required to emphasize equality in death and so as not to unduly burden the family with onerous expenses. Spending money on elaborate caskets mocks the sacred idea expressed in the Psalms “Envy not a man his riches, nor be jealous of growing possessions. For in death he can take nothing with him; his wealth cannot follow him to the grave.” In Judaism we honor the dead and their memory through acts of kindness and by giving money to tzedakah and not through elaborate funerals.

### **Visiting the Funeral Chapel**

To insure an appropriate Jewish funeral it is important to have the cooperation of the Funeral Chapel and Funeral Director. It may be helpful to state at the beginning that you would like a traditional funeral. You will still have to ask the Funeral Director to arrange for Shomrim, Tachrichim, and for the Chevrah Kaddishah. All should be made available for a modest additional fee. Remind the director that you have in mind a simple, traditional funeral. They will show you a number of coffins that are “kosher.” Again, Jewish law requires modesty in the choice of an aron. Embalming and cremation are forbidden by Jewish law as is displaying the body. “Visitation” prior to the day of the funeral is foreign to Jewish practice as is “viewing the body.”

### **The Funeral**

*Kriah* – Just before the funeral service, the immediate mourners perform the ritual of kriah (rending one’s garments). The mourners recite a blessing that proclaims God to be “the Righteous Judge.” Then, a cut or tear is made in an article of clothing (a jacket, shirt, sweater, vest, tie or scarf). Kriah is a public sign of mourning and a physical expression of our grief. It is the mourner’s first admission that life will never be quite the same. It symbolizes that the mourner’s world has been torn asunder and the fabric of his/her life will never be completely whole again. Those who are mourning a parent make the tear on the left side of their garment, over the heart. Others make it on the right side. As an alternative, some people cut a black ribbon pinned to one’s garment. This option does not have the impact of tearing a personal garment and

we encourage you to perform kriaah directly on your garment. The torn garment is worn throughout the shivah period with the exception of Shabbat. After shivah the torn garment is to be removed.

*The Funeral Service* – The service is simple. It consists of: readings from the Psalms, a hesped (eulogy) to pay tribute to the memory of the deceased, and the memorial prayer El Malei Rachamim. The service provides an important vehicle for the expression of grief and brings home the reality and finality of the death of a loved one. Flowers and instrumental music are considered inappropriate at a Jewish funeral. It is customary to encourage friends and relatives to make contributions of tzedakah in memory of the deceased. You may ask the Rabbi to announce a specific beneficiary of such donations.

*Pall Bearers* – It is an honor to serve as a pall bearer, to be one of the individuals responsible for escorting a person to his/her final resting place. It is customary to appoint close family members and friends as pall bearers at the funeral service and at the cemetery. The cemeteries require those who serve as pall bearers at the gravesite to sign a release upon arrival at the burial grounds.

*Burial* — The deceased must be buried in the ground fulfilling the Biblical teaching; “Dust you are, and to dust you shall return.” Cremation, mausoleum interment, and sealed burial vaults are not permitted by Jewish Law. At the graveside, prayers are recited that remind us that God gives life and receives it back. Although God’s ways are often incomprehensible to us, we express our belief that there is meaning and purpose in God’s world. Accompanying the dead to their final resting place and participating personally in the burial are the most important of mitzvot. It is known as chesed shel emet, an act of true lovingkindness. Assisting with a burial is the only completely selfless act. It is a kindness towards another human being that cannot be reciprocated. Every one present is encouraged to fulfill this mitzvah by placing earth into the grave as an expression of honor and farewell. We fill in the grave, at least until the entire casket is covered, forming tzurat hakever, the shape of a grave.

*Following the Burial* – Until the burial takes place, our focus is on offering respect to the dead, kevod hamet. Once the burial is completed, the family enters the state of aveilut (mourning) and we now focus our attention on their needs through the mitzvah of nichum aveilim (bringing comfort to the mourners). The first official act of mourning is the recitation of the kaddish at the grave. Following the kaddish, family and friends stand facing each other in two parallel rows leading away from the grave. As the mourners walk between the rows, we offer them our first words of consolation: Ha-makom y’nacheim etchem b’toch sh’ar avelei tziyon virushalayim – May God comfort you together with all the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. After leaving the cemetery we perform a ritual washing of our hands. This reflects the belief that contact with the dead renders a person ritually impure. A pitcher of water is placed outside the entrance of the shivah home for this purpose.

## **Cohanim**

Because of the sacredness of their role in the days of the Temple, Cohanim were subject to a number of restrictions which are still operative today. One of these regulations is that a Cohen is

not allowed near a dead body. Therefore a Cohen may not attend a funeral, except if the deceased is an immediate relative for whom one is obligated to mourn.

### **Se'udat Havra'ah – Meal Of Consolation**

The mourners eat their first meal during shivah immediately upon their return from the cemetery. This brings home the message that life must go on. A simple meal, full of symbolism, becomes a first step in coping with death. Friends or neighbors (or members of the bereavement committee) prepare this meal. It consists of bread (usually a round bagel), lentils, and a hard boiled egg. These are all foods which, in Judaism, are associated with life. Friends and relatives should also provide meals for the mourners during all of shivah.

### **Nichum Aveilim – Comforting the Mourners**

*Shivah* — Shivah literally means “seven” and refers to the seven day mourning period that begins with burial. The day of burial counts as the first day of shivah and it ends early on the morning of the seventh day. The customs of shivah are not observed on Shabbat, a day on which there is no public mourning. When the funeral takes place less than seven days before Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Pesach or Shavuot, then the holiday ends the shivah period. Mourners may observe shivah in any home, but it is preferable to do so where the deceased had lived. It is preferable for mourners to stay at one home for the entire seven days. When necessary it is permitted to return home to sleep. Mirrors are symbols of vanity and are covered during shivah. The mourners sit low to the ground as a sign of sorrow (the synagogue has special shivah chairs, or the funeral home will provide boxes to sit on). A candle, provided by the funeral home, is lit in the shivah home. The flame that burns throughout the shivah period symbolizes the human soul. The shivah candle is lit upon returning from the cemetery without reciting a berachah (blessing). During shivah certain restrictions are observed. Mourners do not use cosmetics, shave, or cut their hair. Mourners do not wear leather shoes (slippers or stockinged feet are appropriate), engage in conjugal relations, listen to music, or watch television. All of these are considered luxuries, and are inappropriate during the week of mourning. Bathing is also considered a luxury and is permitted only for hygienic reasons. The mourners are also not expected to be the “host.” Even saying “hello,” “good-bye” or “thank you” is discouraged. The front door is left open so that visitors can enter without ringing the bell. Mourners do not prepare, serve or even offer food to those who visit. That is left to other family members and friends. These restrictions allow the mourner to grieve without distraction.

*Minyan* — The Bereavement Committee can arrange for evening minyanim. Siddurim will be brought to shivah. The Rabbi will coordinate the services. Where no minyan has been arranged, mourners may leave home to attend synagogue services. Kaddish is recited by the mourners at each service and only in the presence of a minyan. Shabbat during or at the conclusion of shivah is to be observed in the traditional manner. Mourners go to synagogue for Shabbat Services. On Friday evening, after the prayer Lekha Dodi, the Rabbi welcomes the mourners back to synagogue and leads the congregation in reciting the formula of consolation mentioned above.

Kriah garments and ribbons are not worn on Shabbat.

*The Conclusion Of Shivah* – On the final morning of shivah, mourners leave the home where they have been sitting. It is the custom to take a walk around the block, symbolizing the end of one stage of mourning and the return to our normal routine.

*How to Comfort the Mourner* — Jewish law provides an etiquette of behavior when visiting a shivah home which is a powerful aid to the mourner's need to mourn. We often don't know what to say to mourners. Remember that your presence is more important than any words you might say. During shivah creating the opportunity to share memories gives the mourners a deep sense of love, support and comfort. That is why our tradition stipulates that we curtail normal conversation and avoid creating a party atmosphere through too much eating and loud talking in the shivah home. While it may make us feel better to share a joke, it distracts the mourners from mourning. It keeps them from the important work of remembering and sharing their very poignant memories which are the greatest source of comfort one can have. You may want to ask questions about the deceased to encourage the mourners to speak about them. Also, sharing our own memories of the deceased with the mourners imparts an intense degree of comfort and love. It is important to remember to keep our visits relatively short. It is best to avoid coming at meal times (call ahead if you can only come during the dinner hour). The mourners may also be exhausted, so don't stay too late in the evening.

*Taking Leave of the Mourner* – When it is time to say good-bye, we console the mourners with the phrase: Ha-makom y'nacheim etchem b'toch sh'ar avelei tziyon virushalayim – May God comfort you together with all the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. This alleviates everyone of the need to think of something appropriate to say at this time. The mourners traditionally do not respond to these words. They also do not thank us for coming because it is a mitzvah – a commandment – for us to comfort the mourner.

*Practical Help* – There are other things which the community can do for the mourners. We should see to it that meals are provided for them. When bringing food, it is always a good idea to ask if you can bring something that is needed. Calling will also help to avoid excessive left-overs. Congregants should also check that there is a minyan for services. Members of the Bereavement Committee are available to help coordinate these efforts. Contributions can be made in memory of the deceased. Often a family will designate one or more appropriate recipients. The most difficult day of shivah is the day on which it ends. Therefore, after shivah is over, we should continue to visit and phone. Mourners will need our love and support during this lonely time of transition back into a normal routine.

### **Shloshim – The Thirty Days**

This thirty day period of mourning following the burial includes the seven days of shivah. Following the shivah, mourners return to their daily routine. However, they continue to observe such mourning rites as saying kaddish and refraining from entertainment and festive celebrations. The end of shloshim marks the end of the prescribed mourning for all relatives other than parents.

### **The Year of Mourning**

Twelve Hebrew months of mourning are observed after the death of a parent. This year begins with the day of death (unlike shivah and shloshim which begin with the burial) and lasts for twelve months. During this time, mourners curtail their participation in entertainment and joyous celebrations. After the death of a parent, kaddish is recited by sons and daughters for eleven Hebrew months. Other immediate relatives recite kaddish only during the first thirty days. Kaddish is a public prayer and can only be said as part of a minyan. The recitation of kaddish is not for the deceased. It is for the mourner. By saying kaddish as part of a minyan we feel the comfort of our community. Our sense of loneliness is dispelled by the presence of other mourners and through a new-found bond to other people, to our community and to our people's heritage. Therefore, mourners should say kaddish personally – ideally, three times a day. The practice of hiring a stranger to say kaddish on the family's behalf does not accomplish its goal.

### **Dedicating a Monument**

A monument may be put up at a grave site at any time. The usual custom is to do so within the first year. Although a public “unveiling” ceremony is not required by Jewish law, many people choose to have a formal dedication ceremony close to a year after the death of a loved one. This can be an important milestone for a family in its process of mourning. Serving food or drink in a cemetery is an old custom dating back from the days when cemeteries were a long, physical trek from town. Today this is considered inappropriate.

### **Yizkor**

The memorial service for the dead is recited on Yom Kippur, Sh'mini Atzeret, the last day of Pesach, and the second day of Shavuot during services. It is the custom at Town and Village Synagogue to join in the yizkor prayers beginning with the first year of mourning.

### **Yahrzeit**

Yahrzeit is observed on the yearly anniversary of the Hebrew date of death. Yahrzeit reminders will be mailed to you in a timely fashion if you provide the synagogue office with the appropriate information. Kaddish is recited at services that day, beginning with the ma'ariv service the previous evening. A yahrzeit candle is lit at home at that time. It is also customary to receive an aliyah the Shabbat preceding the yahrzeit. Visiting the grave, studying Torah and giving tzedakah are appropriate ways to honor and remember those who have died.

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