

A TIME TO MOURN

A Guide to Funeral Practice and Mourning

Temple Isaiah
Lexington, Massachusetts

“Judaism teaches us to understand death as part of the Divine pattern of the universe...Mortality is the tax we pay for the privilege of love, thought, and creative work.” (Gates of Prayer)

The first edition of this guide was prepared by Rabbi Cary David Yales, z”l, in 1999. While the traditions of Jewish mourning have, of course, remained constant since that printing, we deemed it worthwhile to produce a second edition to reflect contemporary practice within our community.

Rabbi Yales wrote in his introduction to the first edition:

This guide has been prepared to help the mourner work through grief within the time-honored traditions of Judaism. Those traditions are governed by certain principles such as the *mitzvah* of accepting the reality of death, respecting the dead by according the dead the honor of a proper burial, and establishing limits to mourning. Ultimately, it is hoped that the principles and practices of Judaism will aid the mourner to return fully to life and to be brought closer to the Source of life, in whose unity no one is alone and every life finds purpose.

C.D.Y

We encourage you to read this guide now when the heart is not heavy-laden and consult it when death occurs. We hope that you will find this guide to be both helpful and comforting as you make your way down the path of Jewish mourning. Our Temple Bereavement Committee is ready to assist you with any questions, as, of course, is the Temple Isaiah clergy team.

L’Shalom,

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BEFORE DEATH OCCURS

Visiting the Sick

One of the things which our tradition declares as both an obligation and reward without measure is *bikkur cholim*, visiting the sick. The terminally ill especially need and want the caring expression of loved ones and friends. Please inform the Temple office of the illness of a member of the congregation so that the clergy are aware and can arrange for a visit.

Offering Prayers

The offering of prayers for the sick is a mitzvah. Generations of Jews have found comfort in the Psalms. At each Shabbat service, we take a few moments to bring into our hearts our loved ones who are in need of healing with the words of the *Mi Sheberach* – the traditional prayer for healing. Knowing that you have their permission to do so, we invite you to share the name(s) of your loved one(s) who are in need of healing so that the *Mi Sheberach* can be said on their behalf.

End-of-Life Care

For people with life-limiting illness, hospice or palliative care options may be appropriate. There are a number of hospice organizations in the Greater Boston area, and the clergy will be happy to connect you with an appropriate agency.

Viddui (Confession)

A long-standing practice of Judaism is for the critically ill to recite a confessional prayer called *Viddui* which concludes with the recitation of the *Sh'ma*. The prayer is designed to purify the person's soul so that he or she appears before God guiltless. Consult one of the clergy if you would like more information about the *Viddui*.

Euthanasia

Judaism forbids doing anything active to hasten the death of the terminally ill; however, one need not hinder the departure of the soul, and therefore artificial systems of life support are not mandated in situations where death is inevitable. One may wish to offer guidance to one's family in these matters by completing a so-called "living will." The Temple Isaiah "Estate Planning Booklet" offers suggestions for advance directives.

Ethical Wills

An ethical will provides a meaningful opportunity to offer guidance to one's loved ones, especially to one's children and grandchildren. For more on ethical wills, see Rabbi Jack Reimer's essay, "On the Jewish Custom of Leaving a Written Spiritual Legacy for One's Children": http://www.myjewishlearning.com/lifecycle/Death/Dying/Ethical_Wills_Meaning.htm

FROM DEATH TO THE FUNERAL SERVICE

Affirmation of Faith

When informed of death, the following prayer, called *Tzidduk Hadin* is appropriate for mourners to recite, along with other prayers that the heart may prompt:

Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech Ha-olam Dayan Ha-emet.
Blessed is Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, the righteous Judge.

IMMEDIATE DECISIONS

Consulting the Clergy

As soon as death occurs, the clergy should be informed. Please call the Temple office (781-862-7160) to reach one of the clergy. After business hours, your call will be forwarded to our answering service, and you will be put in contact with a clergy member. In addition to speaking with the family about the funeral service, the Rabbi or Cantor will need to coordinate with the family and the funeral chapel on the time of the service. If the Rabbi or Cantor is unavailable at that moment, the call should be placed to the funeral chapel to make arrangements pending a conversation with the Rabbi or Cantor.

Informing the Family

If possible, set the date and time of the funeral tentatively before notifying out-of-town relatives; otherwise, a second series of calls will be necessary. All members of the family deserve to be notified regardless of past enmities.

Funeral Home

At the time of death, family members must take the initiative as to which funeral home is to be contacted. The funeral home will make the necessary arrangements to remove the body of the deceased, prepare death certificates, publish obituary notices, contact the cemetery, etc. It may be necessary for some family member to meet with the funeral director at the funeral home if the casket has not been pre-selected or at one's home if it has.

The Bereavement Committee at Temple Isaiah has worked with local funeral directors to set up an "Isaiah Plan" which includes a pre-selected casket and other details. This plan is intended to ease the burdens of decision-making at the time of a death. Please see the Temple Isaiah Funeral Guide for more information.

Funeral directors often used by members of our congregation include:

Levine Chapel in Brookline – 617-277-8300

Stanetsky Memorial Chapel in Brookline – 617-232-0300

Brezniak-Rodman Funeral Directors – in West Newton - 617-969-0800

Time and Place of Funeral Service

Specific funeral arrangements are not made until the death has actually occurred. Jewish tradition dictates that the funeral service be held within a day or two of the time of death; only exceptional circumstances would permit delay beyond the third day. Funeral services are not held on the Sabbath, High Holidays, or the first and last days of the Festivals (Sukkot, Pesach, and Shavuot).

Where the deceased leaves unusual instructions with regard to the funeral, a clergy member should be consulted since the sensitivity of the survivors and mourners are paramount.

The funeral service may be held in the Temple Isaiah sanctuary, Temple Isaiah Chapel (seats 80), the chapel of the funeral home, or entirely as a graveside service. Where in the past the synagogue was used only for leaders of the synagogue or Jewish community, it is common practice today to extend this to all Jews. Thus, the synagogue reaches through the entire life cycle of the Jew.

Burial is both the most widely practiced method of disposition of the body and the only method allowed by Jewish tradition. Reform Judaism permits cremation if the ashes are subsequently buried in a consecrated place. If cremation is being considered, it is recommended that one confer with the clergy.

Cemetery

Residents of Lexington and Bedford have a portion of their town cemeteries designated and consecrated as a Jewish section. One must, however, be a town resident to purchase a cemetery plot for a family member. Both Westview in Lexington and Shawsheen in Bedford are exceptionally well-maintained and are utilized by our congregants. There are several Jewish cemeteries in greater Boston. The funeral director will provide information about these cemeteries at the time of death or, as is preferable, by earlier consultation. If pre-arrangements for a cemetery plot have been made, this information should be on file with the funeral director or readily accessible at the time the death occurs.

Temple Isaiah Bereavement Committee

Soon after informing the clergy of the death, you will be contacted by a member of the Temple Isaiah Bereavement Committee. The mission of the Bereavement Committee is to console those who have suffered a loss and to facilitate the bereavement process, in keeping with Jewish tradition and Temple Isaiah custom, at the time of a loved one's death. As soon as committee members are notified of a death within the Temple community, they contact the bereaved family to offer sympathy and support and to help facilitate the rituals, demands, and challenges of the funeral and mourning period.

Notice to the Temple Community

Once the arrangements have been made, the Temple office will send out a congregational email informing the community of the death. The time and place of the funeral service as well as Shiva details will be included.

SECONDARY DECISIONS

Donating Vital Organs

The mitzvah of *Pikuach Nefesh*—the saving of life—takes precedence over all else. Accordingly, Reform Judaism approves the donation of organs of one's body for both saving life and healing a deficiency.

Autopsies

Autopsies are permitted by Reform Judaism where they are done for the purpose of increasing medical knowledge. If the deceased has left negative instructions with regard to autopsy, these instructions should be honored except in cases where performing the autopsy may stem an epidemic or where civil law requires it.

Donating the Body to Science

Reform Judaism departs from tradition in permitting this practice so long as the body will be treated with respect and the remains are buried in a consecrated place when the study is completed.

Embalming

Judaism prohibits embalming since the body must return to the dust from which it came. However, embalming is acceptable where civil law or circumstance requires it.

Tahara - Preparation of the Body

There are many complex religious traditions associated with the cleansing and preparation of a body for burial by a *Chevra Kadisha*. These rites are not customarily performed in Reform Judaism but are permitted.

Tachrichim - Clothing for the Dead

Jews are traditionally buried in white linen burial shrouds. While ordinary clothing is acceptable, this traditional manner of clothing the body obviates the need to select clothing and take it to the funeral home. It is also traditional to be buried with a *tallit*. Some also find it meaningful to be buried with some earth from Israel.

Coffin

A simple wooden coffin is traditional Jewish practice. Some Jews also insist that only wooden pegs be used in the construction. The type of wood makes no difference, but ostentatious caskets or lined interiors are to be avoided.

Shemirah - Watching over the Body

The custom of having the body “watched” through the night by a person reciting psalms is not generally practiced by Reform Jews.

Keriah - Tearing of Clothing

The tearing of one’s garment or a black ribbon as a sign of being a mourner is a long-standing one. Just as the Torah teaches us that Jacob tore his garments upon hearing the news of the death of his son, so too do we recognize the emotional intensity of our grief when we tear the ribbon. *Keriah* is usually done just prior to the funeral service and is usually worn throughout the Shiva or for a period of *shloshim*, thirty days from the interment. *Keriah* is a sign of mourning and as such identifies the mourners to those who call at the Shiva home.

Viewing the Body

Jewish tradition is firmly opposed to any public viewing of the deceased. Immediate family members may view the body prior to the service.

Pallbearers

Pallbearers are generally provided either by the funeral home or from among the family and friends of the deceased. It has been expressed by people who have used family members or friends as pallbearers that they have appreciated the warmth of the personal involvement.

A Practical Note of Caution

Obituaries are an advertisement to all that you will not be home. It is advisable to have your house carefully watched during the day of the funeral.

THE FUNERAL SERVICE AND INTERMENT

Flowers

In lieu of flowers, Jewish tradition calls for a gift that will express sympathy by doing good deeds for the living. However, a tasteful floral arrangement is permissible.

Service and Eulogy

The funeral service centers around prayers, psalms, and a eulogy of the deceased. Additional prayers including the *Kaddish* are recited at the graveside. Participation by family members in the service should be discussed with the clergy.

Burial of Non-Jews

Some Jewish cemeteries permit non-Jewish members of Jewish families to be interred, provided that non-Jewish services are not recited and non-Jewish symbols are not displayed. Check with the individual cemetery.

Graveside Kaddish

The *Kaddish* should be recited by the mourners. Relatives and friends may join in the recitation. A *minyán* is encouraged but not required by Reform Judaism.

Shoveling of Earth on the Grave

Jewish tradition dictates that the family of the deceased be present for the lowering of the casket and for the shoveling of earth, even a symbolic spadeful, on the grave. The Jewish funeral is a rite of separation and grief. Both acts emphasize the fact of death and can serve ultimately to help the mourner.

Burial Vaults or Liners

While neither is prescribed in Jewish tradition, they are acceptable where required by civil law or cemetery rules.

Burial of Infant under Thirty Days Old

Out of a sense of *rachmanut* (mercy) for the parents, Jewish tradition does not require that formal funeral or mourning customs be observed for an infant that does not live for thirty days. The infant is buried with a simple graveside service.

Children at Funerals

Children should never be automatically excluded from attending funerals. Children also have feelings and can, with the help of Jewish ritual, work through some of those feelings. Children's questions about death and the funeral should be answered straightforwardly and with love. The Rabbi will also be happy to speak with the children.

MOURNING OBSERVANCES

Who Is A Mourner?

The laws of mourning apply in the case of the death of seven relatives: mother, father, brother, sister, husband, wife, and child. A child under the age of thirteen need not observe the mourning laws.

Returning to the House of Shiva

After the interment the mourners and family members return to the Shiva house. With the possible exception of out-of-towners who are not remaining for the Shiva, this is not usually the best time for friends to express their sympathy. The mourners may desire to be with one another during this intense period of grief. Some mourners, however, may wish to open the house to friends.

How Is Shiva Calculated?

Shiva means "seven" and refers to the seven traditional days of mourning. The day of the funeral counts as one day as does one hour of mourning on the seventh day. While one does not mourn on Shabbat, it is calculated in the seven. During Shiva the mourner refrains from all ordinary pursuits and occupations and participates in daily services at the home. Where seven days cannot be observed, we encourage mourners to observe the first three days as a minimal mourning period. Shiva provides the mourner the opportunity to work through grief, to be comforted, and to interact with loved ones.

Meal of Consolation

Upon arriving at the house of Shiva, a meal of consolation, traditionally known as *Seudat Havraah*, is served by friends to the mourners. This is not a time for lavish feasting or drinking. Hard-boiled eggs are often served as a life symbol. The Bereavement Committee can offer guidance and contact friends of the mourner to prepare the meal.

Shiva Candle

A seven-day memorial candle, supplied by the funeral home, is kindled upon returning from the cemetery. These words are recited: “*Ner Adonai Nishmat Adam.*” “The human spirit is the lamp of God.” “*Baruch Atah Adonai No-tei-a Be-to-chei-nu Cha-yei O-lam.*” “Blessed is the Eternal One who has implanted within us eternal life.”

Service at the House of Mourning

The Bereavement Committee of the Temple will provide the mourners with prayerbooks and instructions for conducting the daily The Bereavement Committee of the Temple will provide the mourners with prayerbooks and instructions for conducting the daily evening service, often held around 7:30 p.m. The service can be led by a friend or family member (nonmourner), or the committee can try to arrange for a congregant to lead the service. Reform Judaism does not require a minyan of ten Jewish adults to hold the service.

Shabbat Observance

On Shabbat evening and morning, Shiva observance is put on hold and the mourners are encouraged to join the congregation in prayer. The name of the deceased will be read at this time for the *Kaddish* and for three additional Sabbaths.

Comforting the Mourner

The days of Shiva are consecrated to the memory of the deceased. One should not linger at the house of mourning nor speak of frivolous things there. It is most appropriate to speak about the deceased with the mourners and to be present for the daily service. Providing meals for the family is a mitzvah since mourners should be free of mundane concerns.

Sheloshim

This is the thirty-day period following the funeral (including Shiva) when mourners refrain from joyful social events and entertainment. Jewish law extends this period to a year for the death of a parent. Reform Judaism is not as strict in this matter. The name of the deceased is read at Temple Isaiah services during *Sheloshim*.

Saying Kaddish

It is a mitzvah to recite *Kaddish* for parents for a year and for other family members for a month. *Kaddish* may be recited daily but certainly should be recited weekly at the Sabbath service. Reform Judaism considers this mitzvah incumbent upon men and women equally and not fulfilled by engaging another to say the prayer.

Yizkor

Yizkor, the memorial service, is recited four times a year: on Yom Kippur, last days of Pesach and Sukkot, and on Shavuot. Our tradition wisely included this service on these days since it recognized that holiday times bring with them reminders of loved ones no longer with us. We encourage those who have lost a loved one to attend *Yizkor* services throughout the year.

Yahrzeit

Each year the name of the deceased relative is read at Sabbath services on the Sabbath anniversary nearest their death. One may follow the Hebrew or English calendar in reckoning the date of the *Yahrzeit*. The Temple office should be informed as to your preference. The Temple sends a notification letter of the *Yahrzeit* in the mail. Attendance at this service is a sacred mitzvah.

Memorials

It is a mitzvah to establish an appropriate memorial in memory of loved ones. Temple Isaiah provides this opportunity in two ways: through the dedication of a perpetual fund and through a bronze plaque in the memorial foyer.

Grave Marker

It is a duty to erect a mitzvah, tombstone, or grave marker in memory of the deceased. Simplicity and dignity should govern the selection.

Unveiling

Unveilings are not required by Jewish tradition, but many families choose to come together to commemorate the dedication of the grave marker. When this is done, a simple ceremony for immediate family members is appropriate and can take place at any time. (One need not wait a year's time.) A clergy member is not required at the unveiling ceremony but will officiate when requested by the family.

COMFORTING MOURNERS

Jewish

Friends show their concern by attending the funeral, calling at the house of Shiva, participating in and volunteering to conduct the evening service at the Shiva house, preparing the Meal of Consolation, preparing other evening meals for the family, and making appropriate memorial contributions. Friends can also be of assistance by volunteering to transport family members from the airport, watching the house during the day of the funeral, and attending to other practical matters as desired by the family.

Within our tradition, making a shiva call is one of the most important acts of condolence. But all too often we find ourselves unsure of the appropriate behavior. Rabbi Ron Wolfson's article on "How to Make a Shiva Call" offers some important advice:

http://myjewishlearning.com/lifecycle/Death/Burial_Mourning/Shiva/Makingshivacall.htm

Other Religious Groups

Many members of Christian denominations have visiting hours (Protestant) or wakes (Catholic) at the funeral home prior to the funeral. It is most appropriate for people to visit during these hours and not to visit the home of the mourners prior to the funeral. It is always appropriate to attend the funeral, if you wish, as long as the obituary notice does not say the

funeral is private. You might use this as a guideline: visiting hours or wakes are similar in the mourner's expression to the Shiva. The primary difference is that visiting hours, unlike Shiva, are prior to the funeral and at the funeral home. If you wish to send food to the bereaved family, that will also be welcome.

APPENDIX

Select Books on Grief and Dying

A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort.

Ron Wolfson. Combines laws and customs with personal experiences and practical advice.

Healing of the Body, Healing of the Soul: Spiritual Leaders Unfold the Strength and Solace in the Psalms.

Simkha Y. Weintraub, ed.

The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning.

Maurice Lamm. A thorough presentation of laws and customs related to death, funeral, and mourning.

Kaddish.

Leon Wieseltier. A narrative of author's grief during the year following his father's death, delving into a range of texts describing the history and spiritual significance of the mourning prayers.

Mourning and Mitzvah: A Guided Journal for Walking the Mourner's Path Through Grief to Healing.

Anne Brener. Uses the traditional stages of mourning as a basis for spiritual exercises in self-healing.

Open Hands: A Jewish Guide on Dying, Death, and Bereavement.

Rami M. Shapiro

Remember My Soul.

Lori Palatnik. What to do in memory of a loved one.

To Begin Again.

Naomi Levy. The journey toward comfort, strength, and faith in difficult times.

When Bad Things Happen to Good People.

Harold Kushner. Classic book to work through loss.

Wrestling with the Angel: Jewish Insights on Death and Mourning.

Jack Riemer, ed. A multi-voiced offering of thoughts, feelings and memories.

Books for Children

Candle for Grandpa: A Guide to the Jewish Funeral for Children and Parents.

David Techner and Judith Hirt-Manheimer

Daddy's Chair.

Sandy Lanton; Shelly O. Haas, ill. A work of fiction about a boy who loses his father.

The Fall of Freddie the Leaf : A Story of Life for All Ages.

Leo Buscaglia. Classic book for children (and adults) dealing with the death of a loved one.

How It Feels When a Parent Dies.

Jill Krentz. Eighteen children tell, in their own words, their feelings and experiences.

When Children Grieve.

Russell Friedman and John W. James. For adults to help children deal with death, divorce, pet loss, moving, and other losses

When a Grandparent Dies: A Kid's Own Remembering Workbook for Dealing with Shiva and the Year Beyond.

Nechama Liss-Levinson. Grandparent loss workbook. attitudes, themes and sources on traditional, practical and contemporary issues around death and mourning.

Web Resources

My Jewish Learning

<http://myjewishlearning.com/lifecycle/Death.htm>

A transdenominational website of Jewish information and education geared towards learners of all religious and educational backgrounds. A comprehensive resource featuring articles, essays and guided learning on

Ritual Well

www.ritualwell.org/lifecycles/death/

A source for innovative, contemporary Jewish ritual, with resources that address each aspect of the process of navigating death and mourning, from the moment of death, to the burial of the body, the tearing of clothes, the weeklong practice of Shiva, and the recitation of *Kaddish*.

