

# Handbook for Jewish Funerals

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for  
Adat HaTikvat Tzion

## **Introduction**

Adonai, our Creator, has given us the ability and desire to love. As a result, special bonds are formed with people, family, and others so that when a loved one or a friend dies, we feel sorrow and grief. This is a normal and healthy reaction to grief and we should not to fight the normal reaction to this type of loss.

When death overtakes a loved one, life seems empty and the future dark because death simply transcends and defies human comprehension. The question is asked “What can we know of death, we who cannot understand life?”

Jewish tradition has a deep understanding with sad times in our lives and has outlined ways to deal with death and its grief. Jewish tradition regards death as an inevitable part of life itself. “What man can live life and not see death...?” (Psalm 89:49)

This booklet was written to provide an understanding of customs as observed by Adat HaTikvat Tzion’s Chevra Kadisha. A Chevra Kadisha (Holy Society) traditionally supervises funerals in Jewish communities, consisting of volunteers who aid the bereaved and ensure that appropriate practices are followed. It also follows the Jewish methods instead of the Christian tradition for funeral and burial methodology.

## **Before Death Comes**

### ***Last Will and Testament***

Every adult should have a will, a legal document in which one disposes of one's material assets. No matter what your age or financial situation, a will relieves your family of the burden of disposing of personal possessions, avoids or minimizes a range of potential problems and complications later, and reduces probate and other costs.

A will can also specify your desires concerning funeral arrangements. However, since the will is normally not consulted until after the funeral, it is imperative to record your wishes separately and to make them known to those who will be responsible for handling the arrangements at the time of death.

### ***Living Will***

Jewish tradition affirms the sanctity of life and encourages strenuous efforts to preserve life. It forbids both euthanasia and "assisted suicide," the active taking of life of the terminally ill. However, it affirms that when the attending physicians declare that there is no realistic hope for a patient and death is certain, impediments to death must not be created or should be removed, allowing a patient to die in dignity and peace. Thus, Judaism allows the withholding of treatment when its effect is to delay an impending death rather than to prolong life.

Many people do not desire that their life be artificially prolonged when they have an incurable and irreversible condition and death is near or they are in an irreversible coma or persistent vegetative state and are no longer able to make decisions regarding medical treatment. A living will can guide your loved ones in acting in accordance with your desires.

### ***Ethical Will***

In contrast to a last will and testament, an ethical will is a statement to your survivors of the beliefs and values you wish to transmit and perpetuate. It is a mitzvah to prepare an ethical will for the moral guidance of your family, especially the children. Preparing such a will is not a complicated or technical process. It is as simple as writing a letter to those you love expressing your feelings, advice and hopes for the future. As with other wills, it is advisable to prepare an ethical will when you are strong and healthy. All wills should be left in a safe place that is known to the family.

## **Before the Funeral**

Set time and place of the funeral with Adat and the funeral home. Although our tradition prefers having the funeral as soon as possible after death occurs, there are times when a delay is proper. One of those times is when family members must travel some distance to be at the funeral, or if the death occurs on a day that would force the funeral to be held on Sabbath.

Attending to the body Jewish tradition requires that the deceased not be left alone prior to burial. Hospitals should be requested to avoid disturbing the remains until the arrival of a shomer (guardian). It is preferable that shomrim be members of the family, friends of the deceased, or members of the congregation. Tehillim (Psalms) are recited by the shomrim.

The funeral service can be held at graveside, Adat, at a funeral home, or another facility. Telephone immediate family, close friends, and employer or business colleagues.

Once the funeral time has been set, prepare the obituary. The obituary should be published in the local newspaper most often read by your met/meta's (deceased person) peers and friends.

Items to consider including are: age, place of birth, cause of death, occupation, college degrees, memberships in organizations, military service, or noteworthy achievements. List survivors in the immediate family. Give the time and place of the funeral. Suggest in the obituary where memorial contributions can be made. Choose the pallbearers--most often not men in the family of the met/meta but instead close friends and peers.

Pallbearers are necessary when a funeral is held at Adat; they are optional for a graveside service. Six people who can carry the aron (casket) are needed. It is customary not to choose immediately family members. You may choose as many others as you wish to serve as honorary pallbearers. You will need to discuss the eulogy with Rav Nate. Be open and give as much personal insight as possible. Avoid false or exaggerated praise. Tell the good things enthusiastically. Remember to mention what might be best left unsaid. It is wise to arrange for a house sitter during the funeral. Why? Criminals often use obituaries to determine a time to break into homes.

## **The Mourner**

The period of time between death and burial is called aninut and the bereaved is called an onen (female, onenet; plural, onenim/onenot). The aninut phase of mourning ends when the body is buried at which time the avelut, or regular laws of mourning, are in effect. The family member now is referred to as an avel (mourner).

The laws that apply to the onen apply to both men and women. From the moment of death, each family member is considered an onen and the onen is not required to pray or carry out other religious duties or obligations. Male onen are restricted from shaving and both male and female onen are prohibited from cutting their hair or conducting normal business activities.

The prime responsibility of the onen is to arrange the funeral. If the onen is overcome by grief, the Chevra Kadisha can handle arrangements.

During this time, an onen is exempt from positive religious obligations. As such, prayer is not obligatory at this time. However, an onen who finds it helpful to express feelings through prayers may do so. Only relatives or very close friends should visit during this time, primarily to help make arrangements and shivah. After the funeral, a mourner is known as an avel. One is a mourner by obligation for parents, children, siblings or spouse. However, anyone is allowed to observe the mourning rites.

### **Preparation for Burial**

Our tradition has long stood for simplicity in funerals and mourning. A simple wooden casket is preferred. An ornate all-wood casket, though ritually acceptable, is not in the spirit of the law. Cremation is not in keeping with Jewish tradition. If the met/meta, or a family member, chooses cremation, you may have a very hard time finding a rabbi that will perform the memorial service.

Before the met, the deceased, is dressed for burial. We observe the ritual of tahara, ritual washing, done by the Chevra Kadisha.

The body is dressed only in traditional burial shrouds, tachrichim, which are simple white garments, without pockets (which gave rise to the comment “you can’t take it with you...”). A simple kittel (belt or the robe worn for marriage, burial, and special occasions) is more than sufficient.

The body, in the shroud, is then draped with the person’s tallit, after one tzitzit is cut off. The body is then placed in a simple pine coffin (aron), which after being closed, is not again opened at any time except in the rare case of need to identify the body. Nothing is placed inside the coffin with the body (no jewelry, photos, mementos, etc.) except earth from Israel. Sometimes holes are drilled in the bottom of the coffin to hasten the deterioration of the body and coffin.

### ***Autopsy***

Autopsy, as a general rule, is not allowed by Jewish tradition, though there are times when an autopsy might be required by law or is needed for other reasons. One case may be in order to sustain life of another person, or another is to determine cause of death if death was by criminal act. Each case must be reviewed independently.

Jewish tradition states that we are created in the “image and likeness” of the Creator, and that it is sacrilege to mutilate the decedent’s body. It is also believed in Judaism that the L-rd, Hashem, in His mercy, will resurrect the bodies of the dead in the End of Days and that disfiguring the body inhibits Hashem’s resurrection (same reason organ donation is discouraged).

### ***Embalming***

Jewish tradition frowns on embalming. Embalming is viewed as one of the burial practices of the pagans.

In rare circumstances, it might be required by law. It is permitted, though not preferred, when there is a long delay before the burial can take place or when civil law demands it.

### ***Flowers***

Flowers are not part of Jewish mourning practice, though they are often a large part of the Christian methods. The Jewish view is that the L-rd would wish that proclaiming life is of great importance and providing dead flowers is not usually viewed favorably.

In the spirit of honoring the memory of the dead by helping the living, suggest in the obituary that in lieu of flowers, donations be directed to an appropriate charity. If flowers are sent, share them with the living by giving them to a nursing home in your area, or to a hospital, asking that they give them to a person that has not had visitors or has no family nearby so they may give some joy to others.

### ***K'riah***

A few minutes before the funeral begins, the first formal act of mourning, k'riah, the tearing of one's garment or ribbon, takes place. K'riah is a centuries old symbol of inner grief and mourning. Mourners stand as they perform it showing we face grief directly and that we will survive, even without our beloved departed. Before the cut is made, mourners say the words of Job, "The L-rd has given and the L-rd has taken, blessed be the Name of the L-rd," and recite a b'rachah (blessing, prayer) which is a reaffirmation of faith.

## **The Funeral Service**

A funeral can be held at graveside or Adat. A service held only at graveside includes the same elements as those begun at another location. However, it is shorter because certain elements are repeated when a service is held in two locations. A graveside funeral is no less dignified nor less giving of honor to the deceased than any other service. The funeral service is brief. Selections are read from Psalms and a eulogy, depicting the life of the deceased as a guide for the living, is presented. El maleh rahamim, which expresses our faith in the immortality of the soul, is recited on most days. Once at graveside, the service consists of recitation of tziduk ha-din, a prayer which expresses our acceptance of G-d's decisions, followed by the recitation of kaddish and el maleh.

After the funeral, those attending form two lines to let the mourners pass between them. As they do, traditional words of comfort are said, "Ha-makom yinakhem et-khem betokh she-ar aveilei tziyon veyerushalayim, May G-d comfort you among all the mourners of Zion and Jersuaem."

## **Shoveling Earth**

After the casket is fully in the grave, the interment is begun by shoveling some earth into the grave. This old tradition, long neglected, is once again finding favor. This mitzvah (commandment) is known as hesed shel emet, true lovingkindness. This mitzvah demonstrates our continuing concern for the deceased as we make sure the final journey of the met is

completed. Participating in this mitzvah has been shown to be of great psychological benefit for mourners since it serves as an important action of finality and closure. Because some people feel observing this custom would be more traumatic than helpful, they may return to their cars before it is begun.

### **Children at a Funeral**

Should children attend a funeral? There is no hard and fast rule that applies. If a child is old enough to understand the purpose of the funeral and to know that people will be upset, then generally that child should come to the funeral. The child should sit with an adult he or she knows during the service. Remember that children need the opportunity to say “good-bye” to a loved one as do adults. It is not good to deprive a child who is old enough to understand of an opportunity to say farewell and to begin to grieve.

### **After the Funeral**

#### ***Shivah***

Shivah lasts seven days. The day of the funeral is the first day and one hour of the seventh day counts as a full day. Shivah is suspended at 1:00 Friday afternoon and is resumed after Shabbat is over. If a major holiday, such as Pesach, Shavuot, Sukkot, Rosh Hashanna or Yom Kippur falls during the shivah period, shivah is conducted at 1:00 on the eve of the festival.

The shivah period begins after the burial with a simple meal, the seudat havra'ah, the meal of consolation. There is a custom to rinse one's hands with water before entering the house for the meal. This meal, traditionally provided by family and friends for the mourners, is not meant to serve as a social following the funeral. Since it is a time to rest and contemplate the day's events, only family and closest friends should attend.

A party-like atmosphere should not be allowed to develop. The menu for this meal traditionally includes hard-boiled eggs, a symbol of life, and round food, such as lentils, which symbolize the turning of the wheel of life with its ups and downs. Neither meat nor wine, two symbols of joy, should be served at this meal.

#### ***Sitting Shivah***

It is traditional to hold services at a house of shivah. Family members or friends can lead the service. If a family does not have morning and evening services in the home during the week of shivah, it is proper to attend services at Adat and then return home. During shivah, mourners attend Shabbat services at the synagogue: Friday evening, Saturday morning and evening.

Mourners should try to stay together at the place where shivah is observed. If they cannot, they may sleep in their own homes and return to the shivah house in the morning. Mourners should not go to work during this time. Our tradition recognizes that when a major change in life has taken place, the survivor needs to step out of everyday activity for a while. If it is imperative for a person to go back to work, one may return after three full days. However, this does not end shivah. After the work day is over, one should return home and resume shivah observance.

There are a number of practices associated with observing shivah. A seven-day candle is lit upon returning from the cemetery. (It should be placed in a fire-proof holder, such as a bowl or pie plate before lighting.) Mourners refrain from sexual relations and avoid forms of entertainment, such as television, during the week. There is also a custom to cover mirrors in the home to show that we reduce the importance normally placed on personal vanity. Mourners are encouraged to observe the customs of not wearing shoes and sitting on low stools during shivah, which show that we change the way we live during this time.

### ***Visiting Mourners***

People pay “shivah calls” to fulfill the mitzvah of *nihum avelim*, comforting the mourners. These visits demonstrate community concern at the time of loss. The visits help the mourners over the feelings of isolation or desertion, both of which are natural feelings after the death of a loved one. Even if many people have gathered, those present should be sure a party-like atmosphere does not develop. Conversation should center on the life and memories of the departed. Contrary to popular belief, talking about the deceased is helpful to the mourner. Such conversations help the mourner to begin the process of getting over their grief. If you have been through a time of personal grief and the mourner asks you how you felt or how you managed, share your own experience. Mourners often take comfort in knowing that others have experienced similar feelings.

**Mourners are *not* obligated to have food or drink available for those who come to visit.**

### ***After Shivah***

The length of the mourning period varies with on the mourner’s relation to the deceased. For all but parents, *avelut*, the mourning period, ends with *shloshim*, thirty days after the funeral. For parents, the mourning period lasts a full Hebrew year.

*Shloshim*, a thirty day period, is the second stage of mourning. Mourners may return to their regular activities in business and home. However, it is appropriate for mourners to refrain from festive activities such as going to the movies, theater, dances or parties.

During the remainder of the mourning period, what may be considered appropriate activities depend largely on the sensibilities of each mourner. If one has, in the past, gone out to dinner and movie on a regular basis, resuming such activity would be reasonable. However, it would be inappropriate to begin activities of that type during this time.

### ***Saying Kaddish***

Anyone who feels close to the deceased may elect to say *kaddish* (prayer in praise of G-d, recited by mourners). However, children are obligated to say *kaddish*, as are parents who lose a child. Saying *kaddish* is especially helpful to surviving spouses since it offers both regularity in life and social contact with others at a disconcerting time.

When the mourning period is a year, kaddish is recited for eleven months and a day. One can choose, and it is appropriate to do so, to say kaddish for the full year, even if the obligation is only for thirty days.

If it is not possible to attend services twice daily, efforts should be made to say kaddish on a regular basis, once a day or at least on Shabbat.

The obligation to say kaddish cannot be transferred to another person. A parent may tell children that it is not “necessary” to say kaddish or a child may feel that a parent “wouldn’t have wanted me to say it.” However, a parent cannot relieve a child of the obligation to say kaddish.

We do not believe saying kaddish is a mystical redemption of the soul. It is a way for survivors to reestablish their ties with the Messianic or Yasharim community and to see that they are not alone in grief. For those reasons, recitation of kaddish is important.

### ***Unveiling/Dedication of a Grave Marker***

The dedication of a grave marker is not mandatory. If a dedication is desired, it can be led by the local Messianic rabbi or a member of the family. The usual dedication ceremony consists of reading selections from Psalms, a prayer, the el maleh and kaddish, if there is a minyan (Quorum of ten Jews required for public prayer). The usual custom is to wait a year before having the ceremony.

### ***Yahrzeit***

Yahrzeit is observed each year on the date of death according to the Hebrew calendar. Therefore, the timing of Yahrzeit on the secular calendar will vary from year to year. The synagogue notifies members of the secular date if the Yahrzeit records are on file. The names of the deceased are read at the appropriate evening service and at the Friday evening service of the week before the Yahrzeit, if those who observe Yahrzeit are present and request it.

The Yahrzeit observance lasts a full day and it is customary to attend services on the evening Yahrzeit begins as well as the morning and afternoon of the next day. Those who come to observe Yahrzeit recite kaddish as part of the daily service and may lead portions of the service.

It is traditional to make contributions to charity on Yahrzeit. The synagogue notification form may be used in order to make such a contribution.

Perhaps the best known custom for observing Yahrzeit is lighting of a candle made to burn for at least 24 hours. The candle is lit the evening Yahrzeit begins. If Yahrzeit falls on Shabbat or Yom Tov, the candle is lit before the Shabbat or holiday candles. Although there is no formal blessing when lighting the candle, a meditation such as the one which follows may be said. It is appropriate, of course, to use your own words and thoughts in addition on in place of this meditation:

Dear G-d, I light this candle on this the Yahrzeit of my dear \_\_\_\_\_. May I be inspired to deeds of charity and kindness to honor his/her memory. May the light of this candle be a reminder to me of the light of my dear \_\_\_\_\_ brought to my life.

May his/her soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life. Amen.

### ***Yizkor***

Yizkor, the memorial service, is recited four times a year: on Yom Kippur, Shmini Atzeret and the last days of Pesach and Shavuot, during the morning service. 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. It is most appropriate to come to the synagogue on those mornings and join with the congregation in reciting Yizkor.

### ***Memorial Funds***

Families have the opportunity to establish a Named Endowment Fund in memory of the deceased. Once the fund reaches a minimum balance, the principal is held in perpetuity as an ongoing memorial. The family may suggest areas for which the income of the fund may be used.

### ***Yahrzeit Plaques***

Yahrzeit tablets with plaques recording the Hebrew and English name of the deceased and the Hebrew date of death.

### ***Dealing with Grief***

Every person has different reactions to situations of stress, grief and loss. It is not unusual for a mourner to feel depressed one day and happy another or for periods of depression to come and go for a long period of time after the death of a loved one. These ups and downs are part of the process of returning to normal living. Our tradition understands that life will never be the same again after the death of a loved one, however, it is important to try to regain a sense of normalcy as one goes through the mourning period. In cases of extreme depression or long-lasting grief, mourners are urged to speak with Rav Nate or another grief counselor to help get through this most difficult time.

### **Conclusion**

This booklet is intended to provide some basic information for mourners, not to be an exhaustive description of traditional customs or to explain customs as they may be observed in other synagogues.

## Sources

Chesed Shel Emet and Kevod Ha-emet-Death and Mourning Customs of Yasharim, Messianic Jewish, and Nazarene Communities, Berkowitz, Steven A., Rabbi, 2003, Hineni International Ministries

Sacred Pilgrimage: A Guide to Jewish Practices on Death and Mourning - <http://www.betham.org/pilgrimage.html>

Sinai Chapels – Mourning Customs - <http://www.jewishfunerals.com/html/mourning.html>