

A Guide to Jewish Funeral and Mourning Customs



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Made possible by a Community Program Fund grant from the Jewish Federation of CNY.

Introduction

Because we love, when a loved one dies we feel sorrow and grief. These reactions are both normal and healthy. When a loved one dies, life seems empty and the future dark. Jews have guidance at sad times in our lives, because our tradition has outlined ways to deal with death and its grief. Modern psychology has recognized the therapeutic value of the Jewish grieving and mourning rituals and practices which help us express our grief rather than repress it, to talk about our loss with friends and to move step-by-step from inactivity to normal living.

This booklet was written to provide an understanding of the range of customs as observed in the Syracuse Jewish community. If you have specific questions about customs observed in your congregation, please contact your rabbi. If you do not belong to a congregation, we urge you to contact a synagogue before a need arises.

Before the Funeral

Set time and place of the funeral. Your funeral director will consult with your rabbi before confirming the time.

Although our tradition prefers having the funeral as soon as possible after death occurs, there are situations, such as waiting for a mourner to arrive from out of town, which allow a delay. The service can be held at graveside, a funeral home or a synagogue (customs vary). Rather than assuming people will find out from others, telephone immediate family, close friends and employer or business colleagues.

- Once the funeral place and time have been set, **prepare the obituary**. 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 where memorial contributions may be made.
- **Choose the pallbearers**. Six pallbearers are necessary. They must be able to carry the casket. It is customary not to choose immediate family members, such as children, siblings or parents. You may choose as many others as you wish to serve as honorary pallbearers. Check with your rabbi for specific questions about who can serve as a pallbearer.
- You will need to **meet with the officiating rabbi** to help prepare for the eulogy. 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. Remember that a eulogy differs from an obituary; the rabbi will focus on

life-lessons from our tradition tied to the deceased's life.

- It is wise to arrange for a **house sitter during the funeral**. Obituaries can be used to determine a time to break into homes.

What To Do When A Death Occurs

- **Call a Jewish funeral home** to arrange for care of the deceased. If a death occurs in a hospital, or other healthcare facility, their staff can make this call for you. If a loved one dies out of town, call a Syracuse Jewish funeral facility.
- **Contact your rabbi** to assist you and to help arrange the funeral. If funeral pre-arrangements have not been made, you can ease the strain of planning the funeral by having a close friend, family member or your rabbi help you make decisions.

The Mourner

- **Aninut.** The period of time between death and burial is called *anninut* and the bereaved is called an *onen* (man) or *onenet* (woman). The prime responsibility of the *onen/et* is to arrange the funeral. During this time, an *onen/et* is exempt from all positive religious obligations. For example, prayer is not obligatory at this time. However, an *onen/et* who finds it helpful to express feelings through prayer may do so. Only relatives or very close friends should visit during this time, primarily to help make arrangements for the funeral and shivah.
- **Avelut.** After the funeral, a mourner is known as an *avel* (man), or *avelet* (woman). One is a mourner *by obligation* for parents, children, siblings or spouse.

Preparation for Burial

- **The casket.** 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.
- **Preparing the body.** Before the *met* (the deceased) is dressed for burial, we observe the ritual of *tahara*, of ritual washing, done by the *Hevra Kadisha*, the Holy Society. We dress the body only in traditional burial shrouds, called *takhrikin*, which are simple white garments.
- **Tallit.** It is customary to bury a man, or woman if she wore one, in a *tallit* which he or she used during his or her lifetime, with one of the *tzitzit* removed. The *tallit* should be brought to the funeral home. No other objects are buried with the dead.
- **Cremation.** Cremation is **not** in keeping with Jewish tradition, which sees cremation as a sign of disrespect to the deceased. Especially since the Holocaust, voluntary cremation is seen as even more profoundly disturbing. In addition, cremation can put the surviving family in an uncomfortable situation when asked about burial. Do not assume that burial of cremains is permitted in all cemeteries or that clergy will officiate at a funeral service when cremation is planned, either before or after the cremation. Speak to your rabbi for further guidance.

Autopsy

As a general rule, Jewish tradition does not allow autopsies. However, there are times when an autopsy might be required by law or may be permitted by Jewish law and tradition. Each case must be reviewed independently. Speak to your rabbi for further guidance.

Embalming

In most cases embalming is contrary to traditional Jewish practice. In rare circumstances, embalming might be a consideration. Your rabbi or funeral director can help determine if embalming is necessary.

Flowers

Flowers are not part of Jewish mourning practice. 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 Menorah Park or The Oaks, a hospital or other institution where they could give some joy to others. Your funeral director can deliver them for you.

Visitation

Since the days of the Mishnah, some 2000 years ago, the rabbis have encouraged condolence visits to begin *after the funeral*. In *Pirkei Avot* 4:23, we learn: *Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says: "Do not console someone while their dead lies before them. . ."* This voices the long standing tradition that healing and the opportunity for consolation begin after the burial. Friends should plan to attend the funeral, pay a *shivah* call or both, rather than visiting the family before the funeral.

Kriah

A few minutes before the funeral begins, the first formal act of mourning, *kriah*, the tearing of one's garment takes place. *Kriah* 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 Eternal has given and the Eternal has taken, blessed be the Name of the Eternal," and recite a *brakha* (blessing) which is a reaffirmation of faith and the value of life, "*Barukh ata adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam, dayan ha-emet*/Praised are You, Eternal, our God, Ruler of the Universe, the Judge of Truth." An initial cut is made and then the mourner takes the edges and tears it some. The *kriah* is worn for *shivah*, the first week of mourning, (some have the custom of wearing it for *shloshim*, the month following the funeral), except on Shabbat. For parents, the *kriah* is on the left side over the heart. For all others, the *kriah* is on the right side. Speak with your rabbi about how *kriah* is observed in your congregation.

The Funeral Service

No matter where a funeral is held, the service includes the same elements. The funeral service is brief. Selections are read from Psalms and other parts of the Hebrew Bible, and a eulogy, depicting the life of the deceased as a guide for the living, is presented. *El Maleh Rachamim*, which expresses our faith in the immortality of the soul, is recited on most days. Once at graveside, the service is brief and usually consists of recitation of *Tziduk Ha-din*, a prayer which expresses our acceptance of God's decisions, *Kaddish* and *El Maleh Rachamim*.

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-aveilei tziyon virushalayim*/May God comfort you among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.”

Shoveling Earth

After the casket is fully in the grave, the interment is begun by shoveling earth into the grave. This tradition is a *mitzvah*, known as *hesed shel emet*, an act of true loving kindness.

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.

While specifics of how the custom is observed vary, all observe the custom of each person adding shovelfuls of earth into the grave, some or all of which are done while holding the shovel upside-down. That symbolizes our commitment to this *mitzvah* and, at the same time, acknowledges our reluctance to say good-bye.

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, but not complete 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 on Friday afternoon with enough time to make Shabbat preparations, and is resumed after *Shabbat* is over. If a major holiday, such as *Pesach*, *Shavuot*, *Sukkot*, *Rosh Hashanah* or *Yom Kippur* falls during the *shivah* period, *shivah* is concluded on the eve of the festival. Speak to your rabbi for specific information.
- The *shivah* period begins after the interment 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. It is a time to rest and contemplate the day's events; only family and closest of friends should attend. A party-like atmosphere should not be allowed to develop. Synagogue clergy normally **do not** attend the meal after the funeral.
- 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*

- Mourners should try to stay together at the place where *shivah* is observed. If they cannot, they may sleep in their own homes (or hotels, as the case may be) and return to the *shivah* house in the morning.
- Mourners should not go to work during this time. In its wisdom, 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. Your rabbi can contact an employer to explain the practice and make arrangements for someone to miss work for these days.
- 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 (provided by the funeral home) 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 *shivah* 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 leather 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 conversation helps mourners 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.

Shivah Services

- It is traditional to hold services at a house of *shivah*.
- Your congregation will provide a case of *siddurim* with *kippot* for use in homes.
- Family members or friends can lead the service as well as clergy or synagogue members.
- Service times are set with your rabbi.

- 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 the Synagogue and then return home.
- During *shivah*, mourners attend Shabbat services at the synagogue: Friday evening, Saturday morning and evening.

After Shivah

- The length of the mourning period varies with 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 twelve Hebrew months.
- *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 for the first month, such as going to the movies, theater, dances or parties.
- For parents, it is appropriate for mourners to refrain from these festive activities for the full twelve months. You should speak with your rabbi to determine what may or may not be considered appropriate activities during the period of mourning.

Saying *Kaddish*

- 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. Our congregations vary in their understanding of who may voluntarily elect to say *kaddish* through the mourning period.
- When the mourning period is twelve months, saying *kaddish* ends before the full twelve months is completed. 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. Speak with your rabbi to review the customs in your synagogue.
- 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*.
- Saying *kaddish* is a way for survivors to reestablish their ties with the Jewish community and to see that they are not alone in grief.

Unveiling - Dedication of a Grave Marker

Marking a grave is required; the stone is set after *shloshim*. However, a service for dedication of a grave marker is **not** mandatory. If a dedication is desired, the rabbi or a member of the family can lead it. The usual dedication ceremony consists of reading selections from Psalms or other passages from the Hebrew Bible, a prayer, the *El Maleh Rachamim* and

Kaddish, if there is a minyan. Customs vary for the timing of having a dedication service. For more information about a dedication service, contact your rabbi.

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. Check with your rabbi about *yahrzeit* customs at your synagogue.
- It is traditional to make contributions to charity on a *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 that follows may be said. It is appropriate, of course, to use your own words and thoughts in addition or in place of this meditation:

Dear God, 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 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*, *Sh'mini 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*.

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 your rabbi or another counselor to help get through this most difficult time. All the resources of your synagogue are ready to be of help to those who are in need.

Conclusion

This booklet is intended to provide basic information for mourners, not to be an exhaustive description of traditional customs or to explain customs as they may be observed in all the synagogues in Syracuse. As always, contact your rabbi or synagogue staff for further information.

Syracuse Area Synagogues

**Congregation Beth
Sholom-Chevra Shas
(Conservative)**
18 Patsy Lane
Jamesville, NY 13078
(315) 446-9570
www.cbscs.org

**Temple Adath Yeshurun
(Conservative)**
450 Kimber Rd
Syracuse, NY 13224
(315) 445-0002
www.adath.org

**Shaarei Torah Orthodox
Congregation of Syracuse
(Orthodox)**
4313 E Genesee Street
Syracuse, NY 13214
(315) 446-6194
www.stocsyracuse.org

**Temple Society of Concord
(Reform)**
910 Madison Street
Syracuse, New York 13210
(315)-475-9952
www.templeconcord.org

Syracuse Funeral Homes

**Birnbaum Funeral
Services, INC**
1909 E Fayette St
Syracuse, NY 13210
(315) 472-5291
www.birnbaumfuneralservice.com

**Sisskind Funeral Service,
LLC**
3175 East Genesee Street,
Syracuse, NY 13224
315-446-4848
www.sisskindfuneralservice.com

Glossary

Anninut: The period of time between death and the funeral.

Avel(et): The Hebrew term for a mourner after the funeral.
Before burial the term *onen* is used.

Hevra Kadisha: Literally, The Holy Society. A group of individuals who prepare a body for burial.

Kriah: Tearing of a garment or ribbon as a sign of mourning.

Met: Literally, the dead one. The Hebrew term for the deceased.

Nihum Avelim: The mitzvah of consoling the mourners.

Onen(et): Hebrew term for a survivor between the time of death and the funeral.

Shivah: Literally, seven. The name given to the first stage of mourning which begins after the funeral.

Shloshim: Literally, thirty. The second stage of mourning which lasts for thirty days after the funeral.

Tahara: Literally, cleansing. The ritual washing of the body, performed by the Hevra Kadisha.

Takhrikhin: Shrouds. The traditional burial garments.

Yahrzeit: The anniversary of the date of death according to the Hebrew calendar.

Yizkor: The Memorial service.

January 27, 2016

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