

Death and Mourning

Although there is no direct Torah commandment to mourn the death of a loved one, there are sources and references that teach us that we must. The Torah teaches us that Abraham mourned Sarah's death (Genesis 23:1) and he went to great lengths to find a suitable burial site for her, even paying a hefty price for the cave at the field at Machpelah. At a funeral we recite Psalm 23:4, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me." This reminds us that God is with us through the toughest of times, burying our family and friends.

The rabbis saw a need to develop traditions to help mourners through end-of-life grief, traditions which continue to help us today. Traditions get us through tough times by outlining procedures we need to take in planning a funeral, burying our dead and mourning.

Planning for oneself can be a great source of comfort to one's family. It takes the guesswork out of the equation as to what the deceased may have wanted for a funeral, burial and period of mourning and even for memorials that may follow in the future. When a person belongs to a congregation, that temple community is there to bring consolation to the grieving family.

The information in this document is intended to impart information on Jewish traditions and customs which one could use in making difficult decisions at an emotionally wrenching time.

Glossary of Terms

Before Death

Bikkur Cholim: Visiting the sick

It is a mitzvah to visit the sick, bringing care and comfort to the ill in order for them to heal.

Confession: A special prayer

It is a mitzvah to recite the Vidui, Confession, or have one say it for the person who is close to death.

Ethical Will: Ethical document

It is a mitzvah to prepare a document which is a spiritual legacy for one's children. It expresses what they have learned in life that they want most for their children.

From Death to Funeral

Tzidduk Hadin: A blessing

It is a blessing recited following the death of a person.

It is an affirmation of faith that God is the ultimate judge. It is also a component of the burial service, attesting to the righteousness of God.

Keri.ah: Rending a garment

A mourner is obligated to tear his/her clothing as a symbol that a loved one has been torn from him/her. Today, many mourners wear a black button with a ribbon attached to it which is cut before the funeral service.

Aninut: Time between death and burial

This is the time during which funeral plans are made but not a time for receiving condolence calls. The mourning period begins only after the burial. Although a person can purchase a grave site in advance, Jewish tradition discourages pre-planning details of a funeral before a death.

Burial: Burying the dead

Jewish traditional practice is burial in the earth. Reform Judaism recognizes cremation and then burial. When entombment is used, it is suggested that earth surrounds the coffin prior to sealing the tomb.

Responsibility for Burial: The family

It is the responsibility of the family to bury their dead. When there is no family, the Jewish community has the responsibility to do it. If the family can afford to pay the expenses, the temple can charge for their services.

Timely Burial: A speedy burial

A speedy burial is required in respect for the dead. Delays are considered disrespectful to the deceased. However, delays are permitted to allow time for the mourners to attend. There are Jewish days when burial is not permitted: Shabbat, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Yom Tov, major festivals. A rabbi should be consulted regarding burial on the second day of festivals or other holidays.

Arrangements: Traditional/Reform

Tradition dictates modesty and dignity in funeral arrangements in how a person is dressed, the kind of casket and other trappings. It is traditional to wrap the body in a linen shroud, however, Reform practices accepts plain clothing. A plain, unadorned wooden casket is acceptable. Flowers are not acceptable at a Jewish funeral, but requests for tzedaka or donations may be made to the temple.

Funeral Service: Three liturgical elements of the service

The three elements of the funeral service: *Tzidduk Hadin*, tearing the garment; the prayer, *El Malei Rachamim*, acceptance of the divine decree, a declaration of faith in God despite the judgment; and Kaddish. In addition, it is customary to have a eulogy, *hesped*, speaking well of the deceased. The service may take place in a funeral home, a chapel a synagogue or at the graveside. Kaddish is recited at the end, followed by mourners shoveling dirt onto the coffin with the back of the shovel, demonstrating their reluctance in completing a necessary task.

Shiva: Seven Days of Mourning

Shiva is the seven days of mourning following the burial. A memorial candle is lit in the home.

It is traditional to wash one's hands before entering the home from the cemetery. Shiva then begins with the meal of consolation. Mourners begin prayers at sundown and recite Kaddish, a prayer that sanctifies god but does not mention death. Traditional Jews observe shiva for six more days. There are exclusions to sitting shiva on Shabbat, and holidays. Reform Judaism may observe shiva for a minimum of three days.

Shelosim: Sheloshim is thirty days of mourning

Thirty days of mourning begin after the seven days of Shiva. It is a time when a mourner may return to work but not attend or celebrate joyful events such as weddings or going to the movies. One is not to plan a wedding during this time; however, if one is already planned, one should not engage in dancing. Cancelling a pre-planned event may cause a financial hardship.

Preparation of the Body: Care and dignity in preparation

Whenever possible, Judaism recommends using a Jewish funeral service or Chevra Kadisha (Holy Burial Society). The people of the Chevra Kadisha wash the body in a very respectful and dignified manner. Then, they dress the body in a traditional linen shroud, dressing a man with his kippah and cutting a corner fringe of his tallit, rendering it unusable. Reform Judaism does accept burial in regular clothing.

Autopsy: Procedure to determine the cause of death

Reform Judaism permits autopsy for increasing medical knowledge. Reform Judaism also permits the donation of one's body for medical study and organ donation for transplant. Traditional Judaism does not approve of autopsy unless it is for a criminal investigation. If an autopsy is needed, provisions should be made to bury all the parts together.

Closing the Coffin: No Public Viewing

Traditional Judaism does not allow for a public viewing, however, a family may privately view the deceased prior to the funeral.

Embalming: Process of preserving the body

Jewish tradition disapproves of embalming, rather heeding the tradition of the body not having delays in returning to dust. If the body has to be shipped a great distance, legal requirements may prevail requiring embalming. And, if a funeral is delayed in order for mourners to gather together, then embalming might be necessary. Then, all "parts" should be interred with the deceased.

For any questions regarding particular practices or details, consult your rabbi. For Reform Jewish practices, consult *On the Doorposts of Your House*. Speak with family members who may wish to continue traditions and customs familiar and comforting to them.

This material has been specifically designed to give an overview of both Reform and Traditional Jewish customs and practices in planning a funeral and burial of a loved one.

Non-Jewish Preparation, Funeral and Burial

Preparation of the Deceased

Preparation for the deceased and choice of coffin are at the personal discretion for the family.

Funeral

Any religious service is to be held at a funeral home or chapel, not at the graveside.

Burial

- Graveside services are restricted to a non-religious nature, other than found in Jewish Scripture.
- Monument shape or engravings are to be of no religion, other than Jewish.