



BASIC GUIDE  
FOR  
THE BEREAVED



Sponsored by Joan Cohen & Family  
in memory of their dear parents,  
grandparents & great-grandparents  
Marie & Harry Pakman z"l

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This is not a comprehensive guide to the many laws and customs relating to death and mourning. For more detail please consult the Rabbi.

## **INTRODUCTION**

There comes a time when our nearest and dearest are called to their Eternal reward. At such a time, we have a profound desire to honour their memory in accordance with the traditions of our faith and our people.

In order to help you understand the rules and practices of the Jewish tradition with regard to the end of life, this booklet is designed as a guide.

## **WHO IS A MOURNER?**

We are obliged to mourn for a father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister (including half brother and half sister), husband or wife, but not for an infant less than thirty days old. Thus, in-laws and grandchildren are not designated as mourners. Males from the age of thirteen and females from the age of twelve, should observe the laws of mourning.

The Hebrew term for mourner is *Avel*, the plural *Avelim*.

## **THE MOMENT OF DEATH**

During the last moments of life, family members should not leave, for their presence is an expression of great respect.

After death has occurred, the eyes and mouth of the deceased should be closed and a sheet drawn over his/her face. The United Synagogue Burial Society should be called at 0208 950 7767 and they will arrange for the transfer of the deceased.

Call our synagogue office (0208 386 5227) for other matters that must be attended to such as contacting the rabbi, notifying the community and arranging the Shiva.

## **BETWEEN DEATH AND BURIAL**

During this period, the mourner is known as an *Onen*.

The most important duty in this period is arranging the funeral. In recognition of this and of the mourner's state of mind at this time, the *Onen* is exempted from fulfilling other religious duties, such as reciting prayers or putting on Tefillin.

On Shabbat or Yom Tov, however, an *Onen* follows the appropriate public observances of the day.

An *Onen* should not conduct business or professional activities.

## **ADMINISTRATION MATTERS**

1. Contact the United Synagogue Burial Society on 020 8950 7767. If the Burial Offices are closed and you would like to speak to someone please call 07957 119 119 (this service is not available on Shabbat or Yom Tov).
2. Notify the Rabbi and Voluntary Chevra Kadisha. This is optional as the burial office will do this.
3. Obtain a death certificate from the doctor or hospital, stating the cause of death.
4. Take the death certificate to the Registrar for Births and Deaths. It must be the Registrar in the vicinity where the death occurred.
5. Phone the Burial Office once you have been issued with the relevant documentation. The burial office will advise what to do next.
6. Once funeral arrangements have been made the burial office will contact the Synagogue Administrator who will assist with Shiva chairs and prayer books and liaise with the Rabbi about the funeral and Shiva. If you wish, you may contact your own Rabbi.
7. Speak personally with the Rabbi about the funeral service and Shiva arrangements.
8. Notify family and friends of the arrangements.

## **RESPECT FOR THE DEAD**

Respect for the dead is a fundamental principle governing Jewish practice. One expression of this respect is the ritual preparation (Tahara) of the body which is performed by members of the Chevra Kadisha, a group traditionally devoted to the proper burial of the dead.

The deceased should not be left alone before the funeral. Ideally, family and/or friends should keep constant vigil. Tehilim (Psalms) are traditionally recited during this period.

Jewish tradition teaches us that the dead must be buried as soon as possible. A delay is permitted only for the sake of close family who have to travel great distances.

Kohanim who are not mourners should not enter a building containing a dead body. Even at the cemetery the only Kohanim who may enter the prayer hall before the deceased is removed are the mourners. Other Kohanim must not enter nor approach the graves. (Kohanim are normally buried near the footpaths).

## **COFFIN AND SHROUDS**

It is customary for a dead man to be buried in a Talis (ideally, the one he wore during his lifetime). Objects of value for the living are not buried with the dead. Coffins used for Jewish funerals must be made of plain, unpolished boards without any ornamentation.

## **KRIAH**

*Kriah*, a tear made in the mourner's clothing, is an external symbol of inner grief and mourning.

Kriah is usually made immediately preceding the start of the funeral service. It must be done for the mourner while he/she is standing. In the absence of a Rabbi, any competent person can assist the mourner in this duty. A benediction is recited by the mourner just before Kriah: "Blessed Art Thou, O Lord Our G-d, King of the Universe, the true Judge".

For a parent, Kriah is on the left side, close to the heart. For all others, Kriah is on the right side. Kriah should be visible throughout the period of Shiva, but not on Shabbat. The torn garment is discarded after Shiva.

It is not necessary to wear one's finest cloths to the funeral only to subject them to Kriah. An old jacket or cardigan is perfectly acceptable. Kriah is performed on the outermost garment that one would wear in room temperature. This is generally a jacket or cardigan, occasionally a shirt but never a tie.

## **THE FUNERAL: LEVAYAH**

The funeral service consists of suitable prayers of consolation and a eulogy (hesped) memorialising the deceased which can either be delivered by the Rabbi or one of the mourners. Appropriate selections from the Book of Psalms are read and the traditional memorial prayer is chanted.

It is customary that when filling in the grave one does not pass the shovel directly to another but rather puts it down for the other to take up.

## **MOURNERS' KADDISH**

A mourner for a parent first recites a special Kaddish at the cemetery after the burial. (This special Kaddish is replaced by the normal Kaddish on festive dates, eg Rosh Chodesh Erev Shabbat etc). This is then followed by an ordinary mourner's Kaddish. If one is mourning any close relative other than a parent the ordinary Kaddish is recited twice.

The Kaddish is generally thought of as a prayer for the dead. But while the mourner's Kaddish certainly is recited in that context, it does not mention death and the dead. Recitation of Kaddish is an act of hallowing, and praising God and His Name. In Jewish tradition, such an act must take place in public assembly, which is defined as at least a quorum of adult males (Minyan). Thus the Kaddish, in any variation, is recited ONLY in the presence of a Minyan.

Mourners Kaddish for parents is recited for eleven months, less one day, counting from the day of the death. In a leap year, First Adar and Second Adar are counted as two separate months. Mourner's Kaddish is also recited on each anniversary of the death (Yahrzeit).

Kaddish for relatives other than parents is only recited for 30 days

## **MEAL OF CONSOLATION**

An Avel's first meal after returning from the cemetery (*se'udat havra'ah*) is provided by friends and neighbours, who express their concern in a practical way. This simple meal consists of hard-boiled eggs, bread and a beverage (usually tea).

It is not incumbent upon the family to invite the funeral participants back to their home immediately after the funeral service. It is certainly not incumbent upon them to entertain their guests by providing food and drink. For some inexplicable reason this has become common practice. It is wrong and should be stopped.

## **RELIGIOUS SERVICES**

Generally, religious services are held at the house of mourning. If it proves impossible to obtain a Minyan in the house, it is proper for the mourners to attend the Synagogue Minyan for Morning, Afternoon and Evening services, at which they will recite Kaddish. Services are not usually held at the home of a mourner on Shabbat or Festivals.

For women who are widowed or where there are only daughters and/or sisters, services need not take place if there is no male relative to say Kaddish, but Shiva must still be observed by sitting for the required length of time, and the Rabbi will still visit the bereaved. The lack of a prayer service at home in no way invalidates the Shiva. Women are not required to attend services at the Synagogue but may do so if they wish. A women mourner may recite the Kaddish at any service provided there is at least one man reciting Kaddish at the same time.

A Yahrzeit candle should be lit for seven days commencing on returning home from the cemetery. A further two ordinary candles should be lit before each services begins.

## **VISITING A HOUSE OF MOURNING**

The mitzvah of comforting mourners (*nichum avelim*) is fulfilled by a personal visit to the house of mourning. One need not be mute, but neither should one feel compelled to maintain a flow of conversation. The most appropriate topic of conversation is the person who died, and his or her life. A visit should not be unduly long, and certainly is not the time for general socialising.

People visiting a house of mourning should not be served or even offered food by any of the mourners, who thus would be acting in the inappropriate role of hosts at a social gathering. It is proper for relatives and friends to attend only to the needs of the mourner and the family.

Upon leaving, one may offer a Salutation to the mourners:

HAMAKOM YENACHEM ETCHEM B'TOCH SHA'AR AVAYLAY TZION  
VIRUSHALAYIM

("MAY THE ALMIGHTY COMFORT YOU WITH ALL THE OTHER  
MOURNERS OF ZION AND JERUSALEM")

## **SHIVA**

Shiva means seven, the number of days of mourning, which begin with the day of the burial.

Mourners stay together at the home of the deceased or at the home of a mourner, cut off from the normal routine of their lives. They abstain from business and professional activities, bathing (except for hygienic purposes) using cosmetics or cutting hair. For hygienic purposes they may change clothes that touch the body. They also abstain from marital relations

As an outward symbol of mourning, the mourner divests himself of the comforts of life. For this reason, the mourners sit on low chairs, and do not wear leather footwear.

Mirrors in the house of mourning are either covered or turned to the wall.

The day of the burial not the day of death, counts as the first day of Shiva.

## **SHABBAT & FESTIVALS AND SHIVA**

Shabbat is included in the counting of the seven days, though on Shabbat, no outward signs of mourning apply. The mourners should wear regular shoes, sit on regular chairs, and change into clothing that bears no sign of mourning. The torn garment is not worn. They also attend synagogue services. .

On Friday night Shiva is observed until a few hours before Shabbat leaving the mourner enough time to get ready for Shabbat.

Yom Tov annuls the remainder of Shiva, provided that the mourner has first observed at least one hour of Shiva before the holiday began. If burial takes place on the intermediate days of Yom Tov (Chol Hamoed) then Shiva is postponed until the end of the holiday. But the day of the funeral still counts, so the Shiva is reduced to six days only.

## **THE END OF SHIVA**

Shiva ends of the morning of the seventh day. Thus if the funeral was held on Monday, Shiva will conclude on the following Sunday morning. Mourners are required to sit for only a brief period. When the funeral is held on a Sunday, Shiva is observed through Friday afternoon, and concludes on Shabbat morning.

When speaking of the deceased, a Hebrew phrase is generally added: "*alav hashalom*" (may he rest in peace), or "*aleha hashalom*" (may she rest in peace). "*Zichronoh livrachah*" (for a male) and "*Zichronah livrachah*" (for a female) are also used, meaning "of Blessed Memory".



## **SHLOSHIM**

Shloshim (the initial thirty day mourning period) ends on the morning of the thirtieth day after the funeral. It is the period from the end of deep bereavement to resuming life's normal routine.

A mourner during this period does not wear new clothes or cut the hair (or shave if a man), does not participate in general festivities, and avoids public places of entertainment. A mourner does not attend parties celebrating a brit milah, pidyon haben, or a wedding, though he or she may attend the ceremonies. When mourning a parent's death, restrictions continue until twelve months after the day of death.

Kohanim do not duchen during the year of avelot.

## **TOMBSTONE**

It is customary to place a tombstone (*matzeivah*) on a grave, dedicating it in a brief ceremony, known as the stone-setting, which usually takes place within a year of death.

## **Yahrzeit**

Yahrzeit is observed on each anniversary of the day of death according to the Hebrew Calendar. An exception to this rule is made when the burial takes place three days or more after the death. In such a case Yahrzeit for the first year only is observed on the anniversary of the date of the burial. On all subsequent years the Yahrzeit will be observed on the anniversary of the death.

The synagogue records the names of deceased relatives of the membership. If the name of your departed is in the records, you will be notified of your Yahrzeit date in advance. A candle should burn in the home during the twenty-five hour period of Yahrzeit, sunset to evening, starting on the sunset preceding the day.

Mourners' Kaddish is recited at all services on the Yahrzeit, from the evening services on the night before, through to afternoon services on the day itself.

If death occurred in Adar during a Leap Year, Yahrzeit is subsequently observed only once, in the Adar (I or II) in which death occurred. If death occurred in an ordinary year, Yahrzeit is observed in Adar I although many have the custom of observing Yahrzeit during both months of Adar during a leap year.

## **YIZKOR**

Yizkor services in memory of the dead are held on Yom Kippur, Shemini Atzeret, the last day of Pesach, and on the second day of Shavuot. During the first year of bereavement, one may attend Yizkor services, although this is not an obligation.