

Jewish Death and Mourning Customs

Because we love, when a loved one dies we feel sorrow and grief. These reactions are both normal and healthy. When death takes a loved one, life can seem empty and the future bleak. Jewish Tradition outlines ways to help us cope with death and grief. Modern psychology has recognized the therapeutic value of the Jewish rituals and practices which help us to 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 customs as observed at Kol Haneshamah. It is offered to help guide our members and explain our traditions.

A Jewish funeral has two very specific purposes:

- 1) to honor the person who has died*
- 2) to clearly mark the transition for the mourners between their focus on the one who has died and the focus on their own mourning*

What To Do When a Death Occurs

Call the rabbi as soon as the death occurs, or if you know that the death is imminent. You may reach Rabbi Zari on her cell phone, (206) 931-3528. Please do not hesitate to call her even in the middle of the night. Then call the Funeral Home. Kol Haneshamah has arrangements with two different Funeral Homes: Dignity Memorial in Tukwila: (206) 242-1444, www.dignitymemorial.com, and People's Memorial, (206) 325-0489, www.peoplesmemorial.org. Information can be obtained on their websites about current pricing and arrangements. If a loved one dies out of town, call the rabbi as well to assist you and to help arrange the funeral.

It is recommended that you think through end of life decisions ahead of time as much as possible. Many people pre-plan their funerals and handle the costs so that children and/or other family members do not have to figure out those details at a difficult time of loss. The rabbi is available to sit with you and help you make those decisions. Several other people in Kol Haneshamah are also to help you.

The rabbi will ask if you would like a taharah, or ritual washing of the body to be performed. Kol Haneshamah has a Chevra Kaddisha, a Holy Burial Society that can fulfill this sacred task. Taharah is a loving and compassionate practice that honors the dignity of the person who has died with great kavod, honor, and anavah, humility. The rabbi will also ask you if you want shomrim, people to sit with the body until it is buried. The Chevra Kaddisha will do its best to provide both of these services to our members.

Kol HaNeshamah has also partnered with Riverton Crest Cemetery at 3400 S 140th St Tukwila, WA 98168, to provide a final resting place for our congregants and their family members. Riverton Crest Cemetery has established an area within its Garden of Remembrance for Congregation Kol HaNeshamah (KHN) to use as our cemetery area. We currently have contiguous land, initially to include 57 plots and with an option to add an annex across the road in the now undeveloped land in a adjacent garden. All rules and regulations of Riverton

Crest Cemetery are applicable to Neve Zikaron. All persons wishing to reserve or purchase grave plots must do so through Riverton Crest, 3400 South 140th Street, Tukwila, WA 98168 / 206-242-1444 | [MAP](#).

Before the Funeral

If you would like the Rabbi to preside at the funeral, please set the time and place of the funeral with her in consultation with the funeral home and the cemetery. Although our tradition prefers having the funeral as soon as possible after death occurs, there are times when a delay is proper, particularly if the family needs to wait until other family members can arrive. You can discuss any extenuating needs with the rabbi.

The service can be held in the chapel of the funeral home followed by a short burial service at the graveside. Alternately, it can be held only at the graveside. If the Sanctuary at Kol HaNeshamah is available, arrangements can be made for it to be held there. Speak to Sheila Abrahams, Executive Director of KHN, at (206) 935-1590, or Larisa Wanserski, (206) 935-2661. If you are trying to make arrangements over the weekend, speak to the rabbi and she will help make those arrangements.

Telephone immediate family, close friends and employer or business colleagues. Once the funeral time has been set, the funeral home may ask you to 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 people who can carry the casket will be needed. It is customary not to choose immediate family members. Pallbearers can be Jewish or not. You may choose as many others as you wish to serve as honorary pallbearers.

The Mourner

The period of time between death and burial is called anninut and the bereaved is called an onen. The prime responsibility of the onen is to arrange the funeral. 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 for the funeral 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. Although cremation is not allowed according to Jewish Law, many Jews today are choosing cremation or some sort of green burial. Before the met, the deceased, is dressed for burial, we

observe the ritual of tahara, of ritual washing, done by the chevra kadisha, the Holy Society. We generally dress the body in traditional burial shrouds, takhrikin, which are simple white garments. They may also be wrapped in their tallit, prayershawl. One of the tzitzit, or fringes, will be cut off to show that it can no longer be used.

Embalming

Jewish tradition frowns on embalming.

Flowers

Flowers are typically 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, you might want to share them with the living by giving them to a hospital or other institution where they could give some joy to others.

Kriah

A few minutes before the funeral begins, the first formal act of mourning, kriah, the tearing of one's garment or a ribbon, takes place. Kriah is a centuries old symbol that the heart of the mourner has been torn in grief. 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, the rabbi will say the words of Job, "G-d has given and G-d has taken, blessed be the Name of the Eternal," and recite a brakha, a blessing, which is a reaffirmation of faith, even in the face of death and loss.

The Funeral Service

The funeral service is comprised of prayers, psalms, songs, a eulogy or reflections on the person who has died, the El Male Rachamim Prayer, and the Mourners' Kaddish. The rabbi will invite you to consider any special prayers or songs that you might want included, and/or different people who may share reflections. It is best not to have too many speakers (perhaps 3 at most); the shivah minyanim will provide opportunities for sharing additional stories and memories. The rabbi will gather information from you to be able to give a meaningful eulogy.

Shoveling Earth

After the casket is fully in the grave, shoveling some earth into the grave begins the interment. This mitzvah 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. Though a difficult part of the service, this mitzvah has been shown to be of great psychological benefit for mourners since it helps them truly acknowledge the death. Because some people feel observing this custom would be more traumatic than helpful, they may choose not to participate.

Generally, each person puts into the grave three shovelfuls of earth. The custom is to use the convex side of the shovel to demonstrate our reluctance to complete this task. The shovel is generally placed back on the mound of earth, so that the next person can pick it up. Although it is traditional to fill the grave entirely before leaving the cemetery, some will choose to make sure that the top of the coffin is covered before leaving; those who work at the cemetery will complete the burial.

After the funeral, those attending may be asked to 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 God comfort you among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem."

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 concluded at 1:00 on the eve of the festival. Speak to the Rabbi for further details.

Generally, 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 community members and friends of the mourners, is not meant to serve as a social following the funeral. Rather, it is a time for those who come to offer condolences, to share memories and stories, and simply to help provide comfort for the mourner(s) by being present.

The menu for this meal traditionally includes hard-boiled eggs and other round foods, (bagels, round fruits, lentils, etc.) symbolizing the cycle of life. Neither meat nor wine, two symbols of joy, are generally served at this meal. It is also helpful to bring a dish that can be placed in the freezer to be eaten by the mourner(s) at a later time.

Sitting Shivah

Mourners may observe shivah for the full seven days, or if doing so is a financial or otherwise emotional burden, three days. Mourners are encouraged not to 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.

There are a number of practices associated with observing shivah. A seven-day candle (provided by Kol Hanesamah or the funeral home) is lit upon returning from the cemetery. Mourners refrain any form of entertainment, such as television, movies, or concerts 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 traditionally do not wear shoes and sit on low stools during shivah, reflecting our sadness during this time. Mourners are not obligated to have food or drink available for those who come to visit.

Visiting Mourners

People pay "shivah calls" to fulfill the mitzvah of nihum avelim, comforting the mourners. These visits demonstrate others' 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 working through 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. Jewish Tradition guides that we do not speak to a mourner until the mourner speaks to you first. The traditional phrase, "HaMakom y'nachem etchem b'toch sh'ar aveilei Tzion Vi'yerushalayim [v'ha'olam]"—"May G-d comfort you among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem [and the world]" may be offered.

Shivah Services

It is traditional to hold services or gatherings at a house of shivah. The family may choose to do a more formal evening or Ma'ariv service, or a more informal gathering with readings and songs. Kol HaNeshamah provides a case of siddurim with kipot for use in homes. The rabbi, members of the community, or family members or friends can lead the service. Service times are set with the Rabbi. If a family chooses not to have evening services in their home during the week of shivah, they can attend services at the Synagogue on Shabbat: Friday evening, Saturday morning and evening, if there is a service.

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

According to Jewish Tradition, children are obligated to say Kaddish for a parent for 11 months, even though the mourning period is officially one year. Parents say Kaddish for a child who has died, siblings say Kaddish for a sibling, and a spouse says Kaddish for a spouse for 30 days. Anyone can choose to say Kaddish for their loved one for the full year. Similarly, anyone who felt close to the deceased may elect to say Kaddish. Saying Kaddish is especially helpful since it offers both regularity in life and social contact with others at a disconcerting time.

Unveiling / Dedication of a Grave Marker

The dedication of a grave marker (the “unveiling”) is generally done anytime between the end of the thirty day period of mourning (shloshim) and eleven months after the person has passed. If a dedication is desired, it does not need to be led by the rabbi. Rather, a family member can lead it the rabbi is happy to provide you with a simple outline); sharing this with the immediate circle of family and friends can be very meaningful and healing. The usual unveiling ceremony consists of reading selections from Psalms, a prayer, the El Maleh prayer and the Mourners’ Kaddish, if there is a minyan.

Yahrzeit

Yahrzeit is observed each year on the date of death according to the Hebrew calendar. The observance lasts a full day, beginning in the evening and continuing until nightfall the following evening. The Kol Haneshamah office reminds members of the date if the Yahrzeit records are on file. Please let the office know if you prefer to remember them according to the Hebrew date or the secular date (please note that the Hebrew date generally falls on a different secular date from year to year). Because Kol Haneshamah does not at this time offer a daily minyan, the name of your loved ones will be read at the appropriate Friday evening service the week before the Yahrzeit.

Perhaps the best-known custom for observing Yahrzeit is lighting a Yartzzeit or memorial candle which will burn for at least 24 hours. The candle is lit in the evening that the 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 lovingkindness and to give tzedakah 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.

It is traditional to give tzedakah to honor your loved one's memory on their Yahrzeit. Kol Haneshamah always greatly appreciates your contribution in honor of your loved one's memory. An envelope will come with the reminder. You are of course welcome to give to any other organization that is meaningful to you.

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

At Kol Haneshamah, families have the opportunity to establish an Endowment Fund in memory of your loved one(s). Either the rabbi or the Executive can provide you with further details.

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

Resources

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