

Death and Mourning Customs of Congregation Ohev Shalom (updated 4/07)

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 seems empty and the future dark. Jews have guidance at sad times in our lives, because tradition has outlined ways to deal with death and its 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 is intended to provide a basic understanding of customs as observed in our community at Ohev Shalom. It is offered to guide our members and explain our traditions.

What To Do When a Death Occurs

Call Goldstein's Funeral Home (2159275800, Al Mendel) to arrange for proper care of the deceased. Please refer to the information below and Appendix A for a guide to the traditional practices that should be part of the preparation for burial. If a death occurs in a hospital, their staff can make this call for you. If a loved one dies out of town, call a Jewish funeral facility in that area.

Contact the Rabbi and/or Executive Director at 6108741465. You may also contact Stanton Myerson, Cemetery Chairman 6102910747, 24 hours a day) to assist you and to help arrange the funeral. If funeral prearrangements have not been made, you can ease the strain of planning the funeral by having someone, perhaps a close friend or family member, help you make decisions.

If you have not already purchased burial plots at Ohev Shalom's cemetery, you can do so through the executive director.

Before the Funeral

Set time and place of the funeral – and times for shiva (the initial seven day mourning period) and shiva services with the Rabbi, executive director, and Goldstein's. Although our tradition prefers having the funeral as soon as possible after death occurs, there are times when a delay is proper, most significantly to enable all immediate relatives to attend the funeral. The service can be held graveside or with a funeral service prior at the synagogue. Telephone immediate family, close friends, and your employer or business colleagues. Ohev Shalom will notify the community of the funeral and shiva via email and our telephone tree.

Once the funeral time has been set, **prepare the obituary.** Goldstein's can help with this task. Items to consider including are: age, place of birth, cause of death, occupation, college degrees, memberships in organizations, Jewish communal involvement, 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 or specific funds at Ohev Shalom to contribute to.

Choose the pallbearers. Pallbearers are necessary when a funeral is held at the synagogue; they are optional for a graveside service. Six or more people who can carry the casket are needed. It is customary not to choose immediate family members. You may choose as many others as you wish, to serve as honorary pallbearers.

The Rabbi will visit you to discuss the service, burial, and to talk about your deceased loved one. Please have the deceased's Hebrew name, and Hebrew names of their parents, available, if possible. Be open and give as much personal insight as possible. Avoid false or exaggerated praise. These words will form one of the bases of the Rabbi's eulogy. Tell the good things enthusiastically; remember to mention what might be best left unsaid. There is also the opportunity for one or (maximum) two family members or friends to offer short words of eulogy, although this is by no means required.

It is wise to arrange for a house sitter during the funeral. Criminals often use obituaries to determine a time to break into homes.

The Mourner

The period of time between death and burial is called *anninut* and the bereaved (immediate relative) is called an *onen*. The sole 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, shiva, and the meal upon return from the funeral (*seudat ha'avara*). **A representative of Ohev Shalom's Chesed committee will also be in touch with you, either directly or through the rabbi, to see how the synagogue can be helpful to you in preparing/maintaining the home for shiva.**

After the funeral, a mourner is known as an *avel*. One is a mourner by obligation for parents, children, siblings or a spouse. If the deceased has no immediate mourners, it is traditional for another loved one or friend to take on mourning rites for the period of mourning.

Preparation for Burial

Our tradition has long stood for simplicity in funerals and mourning. **A simple wooden casket** is preferred, as we should quickly return to the dust from which we first emerged in the book of Genesis. An ornate allwood casket, though ritually acceptable, is not in the spirit of the law. Cremation is prohibited by Jewish tradition, and our cemetery does not allow for the burial of cremated remains.

Before the met, the deceased, is dressed for burial, please be sure that the funeral home – and the chevra kadisha, a group of ritually trained Jews brought in by the funeral home – do a full tahara (ritual washing) of your loved one's body. We dress the body only in traditional burial shrouds, *takhrikin*, which are simple white garments. It is customary to bury someone in the tallit which he/she used during his/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, other than obsolete or old holy books, if you choose, as the rabbi will mention to you.

We strongly discourage the use of metal caskets, the dressing of the deceased in anything but shrouds and tallit, and the viewing of the deceased prior to the funeral service. Let us remember our loved ones as they were in life, enlivened by their souls, not as they are, souls departed, in death.

Autopsy

As a general rule, Jewish tradition does not allow autopsies. However, there are times when an autopsy might be required by law or is needed for other reasons. Each case must be reviewed independently. Speak to the Rabbi for further information.

Embalming

Jewish tradition frowns on embalming. In rare circumstances it might be required by law. The Rabbi or the Funeral Director can help determine if embalming is required.

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 tzedaka. If flowers are sent, share them with the living by giving them to their nearest seniors' home, hospital or other institution where they could give some joy to others.

The Funeral Service

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 of inner grief and mourning. Mourners stand as they perform it, showing that we face grief directly and that we will survive, even without our departed loved one. Before the cut is made, mourners say the words of Job, "The Lord has given and the Lord has taken, blessed be the Name of the Lord," and recite a **berakha** which is a reaffirmation of faith and the value of life, "*Barukh ata adonai eloheinu melekh haolam, dayan haemet.*" An initial cut is made and then the mourner takes the edges and tears more. The torn garment or ribbon is worn for *sheloshim* (the 30-day period after burial), except on Shabbat. For parents, the ribbon is worn or the cut is made on the left side, symbolically covering the heart, the symbol of life given by parent to child. For all others, the kriah is on the right side.

A funeral can be held graveside or at the synagogue. A service held graveside includes the same elements as those begun at another location. It is shorter because certain elements are repeated when the service and burial are held in two different 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*, a memorial prayer, which expresses our faith in the immortality of the soul, is recited. Once at graveside, the service consists of recitation of *tziduk hadin*, a prayer which expresses our acceptance of God'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, "Hamakom yinakhem etkhem betokh shear aveilei tziyon veyerushalayim, May God comfort you among all the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem."

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 is an act of hesed shel emet, lovingkindness. This mitzvah demonstrates our continuing concern for the deceased and our escort of the deceased in death as the deceased was escorted into life years ago. 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. Family members should perform this mitzvah immediately after the lowering of the casket. Friends can shovel earth on the casket after the service is concluded.

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, the 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 same opportunity to say "goodbye" to a loved one as do adults. Please do not deprive a child who is old enough to understand of an opportunity to say farewell and to begin to grieve.

After the Funeral

Shiva

Shiva lasts seven days. The day of the funeral is the first day and one hour of the seventh day counts as a full day. Shiva is suspended midday 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 shiva period, shiva is concluded midday on the eve of the festival. Speak to the Rabbi.

The shiva 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 gathering following the funeral. Since it is a time to rest and contemplate the day's events, only family and closest of friends should attend. A partylike atmosphere should not be allowed to develop.

The menu for this meal should include round foods, symbolizing the cycle of life, and hardboiled eggs, a symbol of life. Neither meat nor wine (or alcohol of any sort), two experiences of joy, should be served at this meal.

Sitting Shiva

Mourners should try to stay together at the place where shiva is observed. If they cannot, they may sleep in their own homes and return to the shiva 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 period of time. The time of shiva is a time to begin to reorder our lives in the emotional chaos caused by the loss of a loved one. If necessary, the Rabbi can contact an employer to explain the practice.

If it is imperative for a person to go back to work, one may return after three full days of shiva. However, this does not end shiva. After the work day is over, one should return home and resume shiva observance.

There are a number of practices associated with observing shiva. **A seven day candle** (provided by the funeral home or available through Ohev Shalom) is lit upon returning from the cemetery. (It should be placed in a fireproof holder, such as a bowl or pie plate, before lighting.) Mourners refrain from sexual relations and avoid all forms of entertainment, such as television and music, during the week.

There is also a custom to cover mirrors in the home, so as not to groom ourselves during this week of mourning. Mourners are encouraged to observe the customs of not wearing shoes and sitting on low stools during shiva, which mark an active change in our lives for the shiva period.

Visiting Mourners

People pay "shiva 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 grapple with 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 partylike 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.

Shiva Services

It is traditional to hold services at a house of shiva. Goldstein's or Ohev Shalom provide cases of siddurim with *kipot* for use in homes. The rabbi, family members or friends can lead the service. Service times should be set with the Rabbi. If a family chooses not to have morning and evening services in the home during the week of shiva, it is proper to attend services at the Synagogue and then return home. During shiva, mourners attend Shabbat services at the synagogue both Friday evening and Shabbat morning. Ohev Shalom is committed to providing minyan services at the shiva home each night (except Shabbat, of course) of the shiva period.

After Shiva

The length of the mourning period varies according to the mourner's relation to the deceased. **For all but parents, *avelut*, the mourning period, ends after *shloshim*, the 30-day period commencing after the funeral. For parents, the mourning period lasts a full Hebrew year, with the mourner's kaddish being said for eleven months.** Shloshim 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, for children of deceased parents, what may be considered appropriate activities depend largely on the sensibilities of each mourner. However, it is still appropriate to refrain from entertainment during the mourning year.

Saying Kaddish

Immediate mourners begin saying kaddish at the graveside. Saying kaddish is especially helpful to surviving spouses, now alone at home, since it brings both structure and social contact with others at a time of upheaval. For parents, one says kaddish for eleven months. Other immediate relatives may extend their obligatory onemonth period of saying kaddish by taking on the obligation for the additional ten months as well.

Kaddish is said only with a minyan, a quorum of at least 10 Jewish adults, which we maintain each day at Ohev Shalom (8 am weekdays, 9 am weekends and holidays). If it is not possible to attend services, efforts should be made to say kaddish at least on Shabbat, and to meditate on the words of the kaddish each day.

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. **Kaddish, although remembering the deceased, is a structure created for the survivors.** 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 Jewish community, to regain structure in their lives, and to see that they are not alone in grief. Recitation of kaddish meets the psychology of survivors in their loss.

The Rabbi has available copies of the [Kaddish Minyan, From Pain to Healing: Twenty Personal Stories](#), which help us make sense and meaning of this important prayer and ritual.

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 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. The usual custom is to wait at least eight months to a year before having the ceremony. For more information about an unveiling, contact the Rabbi.

Yahrzeit

Yahrzeit is observed each year on the anniversary of the death of our loved one, 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 those for whom yahrzeits will occur in the following week are read in synagogue services each Friday evening and Shabbat morning.

The Yahrzeit observance lasts a full day and it is customary to attend services on the day of the Yahrzeit. 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 tzedaka on Yahrzeit.

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 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 tzedaka 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, Shemini 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.

Memorial Funds

At Ohev Shalom, families have the opportunity to establish a Named Endowment Fund in memory of the deceased, or to contribute to existing funds in memory of the deceased.

Yahrzeit Plaques

The Synagogue has Yahrzeit tablets with plaques recording the Hebrew and English name of the deceased and the Hebrew and English dates of death. To arrange a plaque, contact our Executive Director.

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 longlasting 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.

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. As always, our entire staff are ready to serve you.

Further Reading

The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning, by Maurice Lamm A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort, by Ron Wolfson, Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs When a Grandparent Dies, Jewish Lights Publishing Living a Year of Kaddish : A Memoir, by Ari Goldman

Glossary

Anninut: The period of time between death and the funeral

Avel: 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: Hebrew term for a survivor between the time of death and the funeral.

Shiva: 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.

Takhrikin: Shrouds. The traditional burial garments.

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

Yizkor: The Memorial service.

Adapted from a Publication of H.E.L.P., Home Education Library Program, Beth El Synagogue, Omaha, NE, Rabbi Paul Drazen.

APPENDIX A PREPARATION OF THE DECEASED FOR BURIAL

Many of us are unprepared for the death of a loved one, and are unclear about the guidelines that Jewish tradition provides for bringing sanctity to this difficult moment in our lives and for coping with it more easily.

In Jewish tradition funeral arrangements are guided by the concept of *kevod hamet*, honoring the dead. As a Conservative Rabbi of a Conservative congregation, I want to strongly encourage you to consider arrangements that are consistent with traditional ways of honoring the dead. Please designate these guidelines in your conversations on arrangement or prearrangement with representatives of Goldsteins' Funeral Home, which has served synagogue members ably for over 50 years, or another funeral home you choose.

A primary procedure is *taharah*, or ritual cleansing. In the Jewish community this sacred ritual is performed by the *Chevrah Kadishah* ("holy society"), a group of people – gender specific – who prepare the body for burial. All proceeds for their services are donated to Jewish educational causes in the Philadelphia area. When you authorize *taharah*, all of the other aspects discussed below will be included, and you will be in compliance with traditional Jewish funeral practices.

Even if you decide not to have *taharah* performed, I would strongly encourage you to follow each of these practices:

- 1 Select a casket made solely of wood, so the body can return to the "dust from which it came" (Genesis 3:19) as expediently as possible.
- 2 Embalming is contrary to Jewish law.
- 3 Have your loved one dressed in *tachrichim*, the traditional white burial shroud, rather than in a suit or dress. Males should be wrapped in a *tallit*, ideally the prayer shawl they used in life, over the shroud. Females should be wrapped in a *tallit* if it was their custom in life to wear a *tallit* in services.
- 4 Provide for a *shomer*, a guardian, who will sit watch over the body from the moment that preparation for burial is completed until the moment the body is transferred for the funeral service. It is traditional for family members to honor their loved one by taking shifts as *shomer*. Alternatively, Goldsteins' Funeral Home can arrange for a *shomer* for a small fee, which supports the livelihoods of recent Russian Jewish immigrants to the United States.
- 5 Flowers at a funeral service or burial are discouraged in Jewish law.
- 6 Viewing of the deceased is frowned upon in Jewish law. We remember the deceased as a living person, invigorated by his/her soul, not as a deceased corpse.

These guidelines reflect the highest ideals and sanctified rituals of Jewish tradition, and are consistent with how Jews have approached funeral/burial preparations for two millennia.

If you have any questions or concerns about these practices, please call Rabbi Gerber at the synagogue at 6108741465.