

Dying Jewish: Customs All Funeral Directors Should Know

By Alice Adams



Just as there is a way to live as a Jew, there is also a “way to die and be buried as a Jew,” writes Blu Greenberg in her book, *How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household* (Fireside, 1983).

The first thing to do after a death in the family is to contact their funeral director, along with their rabbi or another synagogue leader. Usually the synagogue will take over many of the arrangements. When the family member lives far away and is not a member of a congregation, however, funeral directors often suggest rabbis who will conduct a funeral. Jewish burials take place as quickly as possible, following a principle of honoring the dead (k’vod hamet). Only if immediate relatives cannot arrive in time from abroad, or there is not enough time for burial before Shabbat or a holiday, are burials postponed for a day. Anything less is considered a “humiliation of the dead,” Greenberg explains.

Most well-organized communities offer the services of a sacred burial society (Chevra Kaddisha) that will prepare the body for burial. Men prepare men and women prepare women. They wash the body with warm water from head to foot and, although they may turn the body as necessary to clean it entirely, including all orifices, they never place it face down.

The body is dressed in white burial shrouds (tachrichim) that are purposely kept simple to avoid distinguishing between rich or poor. Men are buried with their prayer shawls (tallits) that are rendered ineffective by cutting off one of the fringes. If, however, a person suffered an injury and blood soaked into his or her clothing, ritual washing is not completed, “...the blood of a person is considered as holy as his life and deserves proper burial,” Greenberg writes.

From the moment of death, the body is not left alone until after burial. This practice, called guarding/watching (shemira), is also based on the principle of honoring the dead. A family member, a Chevra Kaddisha member, or someone arranged by the funeral parlor passes the time by reciting psalms (Tehillim) as this person watches over the deceased.

Jewish Funeral Service Customs

Generally speaking, all Jewish funerals follow different procedures depending on the deceased person's religion and desires. Each religion has its own customs, and Judaism, just like other religions, does have many laws and customs regarding funerals and mourning.

Which Family Members Mourn?

Naturally everyone who knew the deceased person is in various degrees of mourning depending on the relationship with the person who passed away. Judaism, however, specifies seven immediate family members who are expected to directly observe the mourning period: the mother and father, son and daughter, brother and sister, (including half-brother and half-sister), and husband and wife.

Clothing and Mourning

These seven particular members of the Orthodox family in mourning do not wear leather shoes, put on make up or use perfume, shave, take haircuts, or bathe, and no marital relationships take place. All mirrors in the house where the family is sitting Shiva are covered as mourners are not to be vain. All mourn-

ers sit on low stools or the floor. The word Shevah in Hebrew means seven, and the word Shiva is taken from that to mean seven days of mourning following the funeral. More on Shiva will be explained later in this article.

The Custom of Immediate Burial

The mourning period begins with the funeral. It is tradition for the burial to take place as soon as possible, even on the same day of the death, but no more than two nights after the death. Only under certain circumstances, will the burial be delayed. It

is considered disrespectful to keep the body from being buried as soon as possible. Jews believe the decedent's soul has returned to God, but his body is left to linger in the land of the living.

Jewish people do not have a wake (where the body is displayed), because Judaism belief is that the body should be brought to its final resting place as soon as possible. It is not customary to bring flowers because the funeral is to be as simple as possible.

Only wood coffins without metal hardware are used in Jewish funerals because the Judaism belief is that the body is not preserved because as the body decays, the soul ascends to Heaven.

Jewish Death Rituals According to Jewish Law

- The body of the deceased is washed thoroughly.
- The deceased is buried in a simple pine coffin.
- The deceased is buried wearing a simple white shroud (tachrichim).
- The body is guarded or watched from the moment of death until after burial.
- Just before a funeral begins, the immediate relatives of the deceased tear their garments or the rabbi does this to them or hands them torn black ribbons to pin on their clothes to symbolize their loss.
- Upon hearing about a death, a Jew recites the words, "Baruch dayan emet," Blessed be the one true Judge.

What Are Some of the Basic Jewish Burial Traditions?

If you have attended Jewish funerals in the past, you may have noticed one tradition where the Rabbi or a representative tears the blouse or shirt of the seven mourners as a sign of mourning. It is called tearing "the Kria." For a mother or father, the left side of the shirt is ripped because it is considered a deeper loss for the parent who brought the deceased into the world and is considered closest to you in feelings.

For other family members, the right side of the shirt is torn.

Services starts with "the Kaddish," (pronounced cod-ish) a special prayer that is also recited by a parent for 11 months and by other family members for 30 days.

Kaddish is usually said by the son. If there are no sons, family members can designate someone else to say Kaddish for the deceased. It is considered a privilege for the deceased soul to have someone say Kaddish for them.

Regardless of whether the person is a Reform, Conservative or Orthodox Jew, many Orthodox beliefs are followed or honored when people want to mourn for a Jewish person in the most traditional way possible. Whenever the family is not sure, or they are considering a change in rituals,

suggest that they consult with their Rabbi, or the Rabbi conducting the service and ceremony.

What Are Burial Customs for Jewish Decedents?

Any Jewish person can be buried in a Jewish cemetery. In certain cases, however, if one marries out of the faith or committed suicide, the person would be buried in a separate part of the cemetery.

It is the custom in traditional funerals to stop seven times—as the coffin is carried to the grave—to recite Psalm 91.

Once the coffin is lowered into the grave, family and close friends cover the coffin with a few handfuls of dirt. The rabbi then repeats Psalm 91 and El Maleh Rachamim.

Following the burial, non-family members form two lines and, as the mourners pass by them, they recite the traditional condolence: "Hamakom y'nachem etchem b'toch sh'ar availai tziyon ee yerushalayim." (May God comfort you among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.) In traditional funerals, before leaving the cemetery mourners wash their hands as a symbolic cleansing.

Cremation is not allowed in Orthodox

Jewish law because the body is considered a gift from God, and the Jewish faith believes God expects each one to take care of their bodies and return it to Him in the best condition possible.

Autopsies are not allowed according to Orthodox law, nor are the donation of body organs. A Rabbi must be consulted if an autopsy has to be done or an organ donation is being considered. It is acceptable, however, to donate a kidney during the person's lifetime.

Embalming also is not allowed. This process of removing blood, discarding it down the drain and substituting preservative chemicals in the body, is considered desecration of the deceased person and is forbidden by Jewish law.

What is Shiva?

During the week of Shiva, any family member and friends come to comfort the mourners, regardless of their religious beliefs. It is customary to bring food, although you may want to check if the mourning family keeps kosher. If they do, then bring either uncut fruit or bakery goods from a kosher bakery or store.

At the first meal after the funeral, mourners eat a hard-boiled egg and something round to indicate that life is like a circle and the mourners have no words to describe their loss.

For thirty days, mourners do not attend weddings, bar/bat-mitzvahs or other events that have music. The son or daughter of the deceased does not attend for 12 months. They also do not shave or cut their hair.

What are the Jewish Customs for Visiting the Cemetery?

Customs vary as to when one may visit the grave site. In Israel, it is customary for people to go on the day they finish sitting Shiva. Others may go at the end of the Shloshim (The Thirty Days), others don't go for eleven months.

Visitors can bring live flowers although the Orthodox custom, which many other Jewish people also do, is to put stones on the grave instead. Putting a pebble on the grave is an expression of someone having visited to pay respect for the deceased person.

Helpful Tips for the Jewish Family: A Checklist

- Requesting the death certificate—for legal purposes.
- Making arrangements with funeral home—to remove and prepare the body for the funeral.
- Find a Rabbi—to provide guidance and spiritual comfort and to make arrangements for the service.
- Contact all family members and friends.
- Notify Employer.
- Inform the deceased person's affiliations, i.e. professional and social organizations.
- Notify Insurance agent.

Most importantly you should know where the location is for the wills and vital papers, records, and bank safe deposit box keys and their tallit if the deceased is a male.

What about the Unveiling?

Customs also vary about the Tombstone Unveiling ceremony. In Israel, many people do it after 30 days; other people do it at the 11th month after the burial. The family Rabbi would be the best person to consult.

Any information can be put on the tombstone. The usual procedure is to place both the English and Hebrew names of the deceased on the tombstone with their father's name. Some people may also list the birth date and the date that the person passed away. Jewish people who are Cohenim or Leviim also put symbols such as a pair of hands or a wash basin to show that they are a Cohen or a Levi.

What Happens on the Anniversary of Death?

Those in the Jewish faith observe the Yartzheit (anniversary date of passing) on the day the person passed away according to the Jewish calendar. During the first year after a parent passes away, one joins in the Yizkor services on the three Festivals and Yom Kippur but does not say the prayer. One of

the reasons for not saying the prayer is because Kaddish is said for the person everyday during the first eleven months. Yizkor in Hebrew means remember.

Yizkor is a prayer said in memory of the person. This prayer is said on Yom Kippur, Shimini Atzeretz, on the last day of Passover, and Shavuot.

What about Making Arrangements?

Many Jewish families will want assistance from a knowledgeable funeral director regarding the following: arranging for limousine service to and from the funeral; selecting sympathy acknowledgment cards; placing obituaries in the local and Jewish newspapers; obtaining death certificates and giving out Yartzheit candles (memorial candle for the week of Shiva) to the family.

If the family members belong to a Temple or Synagogue, they can ask their Rabbi to conduct the services. If the members are not affiliated with a Temple and want a specific Rabbi, they need to determine if the Rabbi is available and agreeable to conduct the service. Otherwise, the funeral home can locate a Rabbi to conduct the service.