



When A Loved One Dies: A Resource Guide from the Chapel Hill Kehillah Synagogue

Jewish tradition provides a variety of rituals and practices to honor the dead and to allow mourners to adjust to the loss of a loved one. An important role of the Kehillah Synagogue community is to assist members during difficult life transitions, providing spiritual and emotional support. This brochure offers a brief description of traditional and contemporary Jewish ritual practices and explains the type of support provided by the Rabbi, Chevra Kaddisha (burial society), and Kehillah community. It also includes specific information for someone making burial arrangements after the death of a loved one.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact the Kehillah office and/or the rabbi. The rabbi is available to answer your questions and to explain more about the traditions and modern options included in this brochure.

Kehillah office: (919)942-8914

Rabbi's study: (919) 942-5915

Rabbi's Home study: (919) 969-1138 (for a death after office hours)

Adapted from Adat Shalom's Guide to Jewish Funeral and Mourning Practices



Pre-Planning

Coping with the death of a loved one can be eased if decisions are based on your loved one's desires, made in advance, and communicated to those who will carry them out. Below are some considerations to discuss with family members.

Funeral Home Arrangements

Though there is no need to contact funeral homes before the death of a loved one, it is advisable to consider options. Howerton & Bryan Funeral Home in Durham (1005 West Main Street, Durham, 919-682-5464) is well-versed in Jewish customs and accommodates Jewish burial practices such as ritual guarding and washing of the body.

Living Wills and Powers of Attorney

Many individuals describe wishes concerning terminal illness through living wills and medical powers of attorney. It is extremely important that an individual's wishes are captured in legally-binding documents and discussed with those expected to carry them out, to be certain they accept, are comfortable with, and understand the role(s) assigned to them.

Location of Financial Information

It is important to document where to find savings accounts, checking accounts, and the most current will.

Organ Donation

One important decision is whether to offer to be an organ donor. Organ donation is among the truest ways we can live on after our own passing. Reconstructionists encourage organ donation as an ultimate example of saving a life – *pikuach nefesh*.

When A Loved One Dies

If you are present at the time of death. It is traditional to close the eyes and mouth of the deceased and to draw a covering, such as a sheet, over the body, including the face. If you are able and it is safe, you may place a candle or light by the head of the deceased. This represents the eternal nature of the soul even as we recognize the finite nature of life. You may also follow the tradition of placing the body with the feet facing the door.

Tearing of a garment (k'riah). It is customary to tear the garment you are wearing when present at the death of an immediate family member (parent, sibling, spouse, child) or when hearing of the death. This act expresses the emotional pain of grief and that death rends the fabric of life. For the death of a parent, the tear is on the left side over the heart. For other immediate relatives, the tear is on the right.

Alternatively, k'riah may take place at the funeral, prior to internment. A ribbon is often used rather than one's clothing. A blessing is said at the time witnessing or hearing of a death, and prior to k'riah:

Baruch atah Adonai eloheynu melech ha'olam, dayan ha'emet.
Blessed are you, Source of truth and life's boundaries.

Following tearing, this verse is recited:

Adonai natan, va'Adonai lakach, y'hi Shem Adonai m'vorach.
God has given and God has taken; praised be God's name.

The rended garment or ribbon may be worn—with the exception of on Shabbat—until the conclusion of shloshim (the 30 days after burial).

Immediately contact the Rabbi. Call the Kehillah office (919) 942-8914 to let the rabbi know and to discuss the funeral. After office hours, call the Rabbi's home study, (919) 969-1138.

Soon After A Loved One Dies

Call the Funeral Home. Howerton & Bryan in Durham, (919) 682-5464, understands and accommodates Jewish burial practices, including having the Kehillah's Chevra Kaddisha (Sacred Burial Society) prepare the deceased for burial and providing a simple pine coffin and a shiva candle.

Notify family members. According to Jewish tradition, all family members should be notified of death regardless of any feelings of anger or conflict between them and the mourner or the deceased. The death of a loved one may provide a chance for healing.

Meet with the Rabbi. The meeting will include: plans for the funeral; discussion of wishes regarding traditional Jewish burial rituals (see next page); agreement on the time and place of funeral and burial; a decision on the number, time, and location of shiva minyanim; and the designation of any charity for donations in honor of the deceased. When these decisions have been made, the Kehillah will communicate them to the congregation via email. The rabbi can also discuss traditional Jewish burial rituals, answer questions about autopsy, and provide any other information as requested.

Jewish Mourners

In Jewish tradition, mourners are the parents, siblings, children, and spouse of the deceased. From death until the burial—the period known as *aninut*—their only obligation is to make arrangements for the funeral. During this harried and confusing initial stage of grief, mourners are relieved of all other regular responsibilities.

In some families, the question arises whether Jewish customs should be followed by non-Jews mourning Jews or by Jews mourning non-Jews. The rabbi is available to discuss these issues. Ultimately, individuals are encouraged to observe Jewish rituals for anyone for whom it seems appropriate, whenever the rituals are comforting.

Traditional Rites

If the deceased requested traditional burial rituals, or if you wish to follow these rituals, the Rabbi will communicate your wishes to the Kehillah's Chevra Kadisha, who perform sh'mira and tahara in preparation for burial. When requested, the Chevra Kaddisha endeavors also to provide tahara for non-member burials.

Tahara. Tahara is the respectful washing of the body and recitation of prayers to honor the body as the vessel that held the spirit in life. After tahara, the body is dressed in tachrichim (shrouds) and placed in the coffin, also called the aron.

Sh'mira. Traditionally, the body is not left alone from death until burial. The Kehillah provides shomrim (guards/accompaniers) to the extent possible. Shomrim watch over the body at the funeral home until burial, including during the night.

Aron. The traditional aron (coffin) is simple pine wood without nails or decoration, reflecting the Jewish value that all are equal in death. It also re-enforces Judaism's this-worldly emphasis by not lavishing great resources on the deceased. The human body (adam) is closely related to the earth (adamah); we were taken from it, and this tradition ensures completion of the natural cycle "from dust to dust."

Note: It is not in keeping with Jewish tradition for the body to be embalmed, displayed publicly, or cremated. Such requests should be discussed with the Rabbi.

For more information, see "Guide to Mourning Practice" by Rabbi Richard Hirsch in our shiva minyanim book *Prayers for a House of Mourning*.

The Funeral

Timing. A Jewish funeral generally occurs within 24 hours of death; however, sometimes the service is delayed for several days to allow for travel time of mourners.

Location. The funeral service may be held at the funeral home, followed by a procession to the cemetery. Alternately, families may choose for the full funeral to be held at the graveside.

The Funeral Service. The immediate family sits together in the front row. The service includes chanting of psalms, a eulogy, and El Malei Rachamim—the traditional memorial prayer asking for eternal peace for the deceased. Sometimes readings or musical offerings are added. A eulogy may be given by a family member, the clergy, and/or a friend; mourners are not expected to give a eulogy but may do so if they desire.

During the service, the closed coffin remains in view, often covered with a special cloth called a pall. At the end of the service, it is taken to the hearse, driven to the cemetery, and taken from the hearse to the graveside by six family or friends (pallbearers) selected by the mourners. The pallbearers, generally not immediate mourners, can be either gender and of any faith; honorary pallbearers and/or funeral home staff may assist.

The Burial Service. This service begins after mourners arrive at the cemetery and includes lowering the casket into the grave, repetition of the El Malei Rachamim prayer, and the Mourner's Kaddish. Afterwards, mourners and others are encouraged to cover the coffin with earth. This great act of chesed, loving-kindness, is also an important cathartic moment for the mourners and the last act of physical caring we show toward the deceased. Mourners may leave the cemetery walking between two lines formed by family and friends offering support and comfort.

Returning Home & Shiva

Returning Home. Family and friends traditionally wash their hands after leaving the cemetery and before entering the house of mourning; a pitcher, basin, and towels can be placed outside the home for this purpose. This act affirms life after close contact with death. Also, a special shiva candle is lit and burns for the next seven days. A meal of consolation is served to the mourners. *We recommend mourners identify an individual who can liaison with the office to help coordinate this meal and shiva minyanim.*

Shiva. Shiva is the seven-day period of intense mourning that begins on the day of burial. During shiva, mourners are encouraged to remain home, refrain from routine activities, and use the time to adjust to the death. Families observe shiva to varying degrees. Friends and relatives may visit and offer support. Kaddish may be said daily in the home with a minyan—at least ten people who convene for prayers, reminiscences, and emotional support. The Rabbi and administrator help arrange shiva minyanim.

Some mourners cover the mirrors, sit on lower seats, refrain from shaving or grooming, and avoid wearing shoes at home. Friends and family are encouraged to donate tzedakah in honor of the deceased instead of sending flowers. While light food is provided during shiva, mourners should not be concerned about hosting. Visitors will bring sufficient food.

Public mourning rituals are suspended for Shabbat, when mourners may go to synagogue to say kaddish.

At the conclusion of this period, it is customary for a friend or relative to walk the mourners around the block to signify shiva's end.

If death and burial occur out of town, congregants may hold some of the shiva after returning home so that the Kehillah community can offer emotional support. The Kehillah will help arrange minyanim.

The Year & Beyond

Shloshim. The thirty days after burial are shloshim, when mourners return to work and normal activities but refrain from socializing and entertainment.

Sh'nat Ha'Evel (Year of mourning). Traditionally, for those who have lost a parent, mourning ends after 11 months. Mourning for all other relatives ends with shloshim. In modern practice, mourners may recite kaddish for 11 months for other immediate relatives as well. Of course, kaddish is just one way of remembering the deceased during this year. Individuals may dedicate time for study, tzedakah, or social justice activities in memory of the deceased.

Unveiling. It is common to "unveil" or consecrate the grave marker, concurrent with the first yahrzeit (first anniversary of the death). The unveiling is a brief ceremony at graveside that includes an opportunity for reflections of the family as well as chanting of El Malei Rachamim and Mourner's Kaddish.

Annual Yahrzeit: The anniversary of the death is commemorated each year by giving tzedakah, saying kaddish in the synagogue, and lighting a yahrzeit candle at home. Yahrzeit candles burn for 24 hours and can be purchased at the Kehillah. On the Shabbat preceding yahrzeit, the rabbi or service leader reads the name of the deceased during services.

Memorial Plaque

The Kehillah has a memorial plaque on the bima to honor the memory of those who have died. For information about this act of commemoration, please contact the office.