Guide to Mourning Practices

We say Mourner's Kaddish to honor the deceased. It is recited collectively, serves as an affirmation of Jewish faith, and reminds us that we are not alone in our grief.

אגודת ישרים

PARK AVENUE SYNAGOGUE

Guide to Mourning Practices

Park Avenue Synagogue clergy, staff, and Nechama (bereavement) volunteers are available to provide support to congregants who have lost a loved one. They are also available to answer questions about the topics in this guide.

The information provided is what is considered customary. Please speak to the clergy if you have questions about the practices included.

Who is a Mourner?

Under Jewish custom, mourners are those who had a mother, father, son, daughter, brother, sister (including half-brother and half-sister), husband or wife that recently passed away. It is a mitzvah to mourn for these loved ones. One formally mourns a parent for a year, while the mourning period for the other family members noted lasts 30 days. In the case of another relative, such as a step-parent, grandparent or non-Jewish relative, one may choose among the mourning rites described in this guide in consultation with clergy.

Time Between Death and Burial

During the period between death and burial, mourners are known as *Onanim* (*onen*, singular). Their most important duty is to arrange for the funeral and the burial. Therefore, an *Onen* is exempt from positive commandments such as daily prayers and wearing tefillin. One does not say the Mourner's Kaddish until the burial.

Scheduling a Funeral

While Jewish custom calls for the dead to be buried as soon as possible (traditionally within 24 hours), a delay is commonly permitted to allow the family to make funeral arrangements or for the sake of honoring the dead by waiting for relatives and friends who must travel great distances. In addition, the funeral must be delayed if Shabbat, a festival, or certain holidays occur immediately afterward.

Respect for the Deceased

RITUAL WASHING OF THE BODY

Judaism teaches that human life is sacred. The human body deserves respect, even after the breath of life has departed. Respect for the dead is a fundamental principle governing Jewish practice. One expression of this respect is *Tahara*, the ritual washing of the body that is then dressed in burial shrouds. This function is performed by members of the *Hevra Kadisha*, a group devoted to the ritual burial of the dead. At the request of the family, the funeral home typically arranges the *Tahara*.

DRESSING OF THE BODY

The body is customarily clothed in plain white linen, cotton, or muslin shrouds because of the belief that all Jews should be buried in the same type of inexpensive garments. This practice emphasizes that all people, rich and poor alike, are equal before God. Individuals who wear a tallit are customarily buried in one that they used during their lifetime after one of the fringes is cut to make it ritually unfit. Additionally, according to Jewish custom, it is considered inappropriate to apply cosmetics to the deceased.

CASKET

The practice of using a plain, inexpensive wooden casket also emphasizes that all people are equal before God. Objects of value for the living are not to be buried with the dead. It is Jewish tradition to have a closed casket.

ATTENDING THE BODY

To show respect, the deceased is not to be left alone before the funeral. To maintain a constant watch, arrangements may be made for individuals, *Shomrim* (attendants), to be with the body day and night. Usually, this *Shemirah* (attending the body) may be arranged with the funeral home, but it can also be done by family or friends. Those who are with the body chant and read from the Book of Psalms.

AUTOPSY
Autopsies are generally forbidden unless critical information pertaining to the health of others could be determined, or information is needed as part of a criminal investigation.

Kriah

Kriah, a tear made in the mourner's clothing or on a ribbon attached to the clothing, is an external symbol of inner grief and mourning, a symbolic representation of a broken heart. *Kriah* is usually done immediately before the funeral service, assisted by the clergy. A blessing is recited by the mourner just before tearing *Kriah*:

Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha-olam, dayan ha'emet.

("Praised are You, Lord our God, Sovereign of the universe, the true judge").

Like the Mourner's Kaddish, this blessing is a reaffirmation of faith, and of the value of life, made at a time of intense sorrow and pain. The torn garment (or ribbon) is worn throughout the seven days of shiva but not on Shabbat.

The Funeral

Typically, the funeral and burial services are not lengthy. In addition to prayers and biblical readings, it is appropriate for a member of the clergy to recite a eulogy. Family members and friends often speak too. It is also appropriate for loved ones to speak at shiva services later. Some people prefer not to speak and might ask others to read something for them or choose to share their words another way.

The Burial

At the gravesite, relatives and friends drop several spades of earth on the lowered casket or may cover it fully as the last act of kindness, a kindness for which they expect no recompense. The memorial prayer (El Maleh Rachamim) and Kaddish are then recited. At the conclusion of the burial, it is customary for the mourners to walk between two lines formed by the others present, who say,

Hamakom y'nakhem etkhem b'tokh sh'ar aveilei Tzion v'y'rushalayim.

("May God comfort you along with all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem").

The Mourner's Kaddish

Kaddish is recited at the cemetery after burial to honor the deceased. It is recited collectively, serves as an affirmation of Jewish faith, and reminds us that we are not alone in our grief. For Kaddish to be recited, it is traditional to have at least 10 Jewish adults (a minyan). Traditionally, the Mourner's Kaddish is recited daily for 11 months minus one day for a parent. For other relatives, it is recited for 30 days.

Returning from the Cemetery – Shiva Begins

Before entering the home upon returning from the cemetery, it is customary to rinse one's hands (without a blessing) using a pitcher filled with water left outside the door for that purpose. A candle (furnished by the funeral home) is lit (without reciting a blessing). The candle, which symbolizes the eternal soul, burns continuously for seven days.

It is customary for friends and family to provide a first meal, which typically includes round foods such as hard-boiled eggs or lentils that symbolize the circle of life and hope for the future. To be freed from physical distractions, some people cover mirrors or turn them to the wall.

Shiva

It is customary to sit shiva for a father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister (including half-brother and half-sister), husband, or wife. Shiva means "seven" which is the number of days one traditionally sits shiva. Day 1 is the day of burial. During shiva, it is traditional for mourners to abstain from business, professional activities, and wearing leather shoes. It is also traditional, during shiva, for mourners to sit on low stools or chairs (except while eating) – this practice is symbolic of being "brought low" by grief. Mourners also abstain from cutting hair and shaving during shiva and until the conclusion of *Shloshim* (the 30th day of mourning).

The period of shiva is intentionally set aside from normal, everyday life to enable mourners to gather their thoughts, to focus on memories of the deceased, and to be comforted by members of the community. During shiva, the mourner should be waited upon, brought meals, and cared for by family, friends, and community. The mourner is not the "host" of shiva, but rather, the recipient of communal care.

Shiva and Shabbat

While Shabbat is counted in the seven days of shiva, one does not sit shiva on Shabbat. On Shabbat, mourners are able to wear regular shoes, sit on regular chairs, and change into clothing that bears no signs of mourning. It is also appropriate to attend synagogue services on Shabbat.

Shiva and Holidays/Festivals

The length and timing of shiva is impacted by the high holidays and festivals (Sukkot, Pesach, Shavuot, Shemini Atzeret, and Simhat Torah), so we encourage you to speak with a clergy member if you have questions.

Shiva Minyan

For each day of the shiva, clergy can be available to lead an evening minyan where the mourner can say Kaddish.

Concluding Shiva

Shiva ends on the morning of the seventh day (the day of the burial counts as the first day). Shabbat is included in counting the seven days, even though one does not sit shiva on Shabbat. On Friday (unless it is the seventh day of shiva) or on the day before a festival, shiva is observed until 2 ½ hours before sunset.

For the last day of shiva, the mourners take a short walk outside together, often around the block, symbolizing their return to life's normal routine.

Period of Mourning

For a parent, one mourns for 12 months after the day of death, which is one month longer than the period of saying Kaddish. For other relatives, one mourns for 30 days, which is called *Shloshim* ("thirty"). *Shloshim* ends on the morning of the 30th day after the funeral. A mourner, traditionally, does not participate in festivities and avoids public places of entertainment during mourning.

Unveiling

It is customary to place a tombstone on a grave, dedicating it in a brief ceremony called an "unveiling." That ceremony may take place at any time after shiva, although it typically occurs within a year after the death. A clergy member can, but need not, officiate.

Yahrzeit

Yahrzeit is observed on each anniversary of the day of death according to the Hebrew calendar. It is a day of personal reflection and remembrance, and there are a variety of rituals and traditions to honor the memory of those we have lost.

A memorial Yahrzeit candle should burn in the home during the 24-hour period of Yahrzeit, sunset to sunset, starting on the evening preceding the day. There is no blessing recited over it. When the Yahrzeit coincides with Shabbat or a festival, the candle should be lit before the candle lighting for the day. No prayer is recited.

When observing a Yahrzeit, one has the opportunity to say Kaddish throughout the 24-hour period of the anniversary of your loved one's death – starting with the Ma'ariv (or evening) service as the Yahrzeit period begins. The next day, one can say Kaddish at the Shaharit (morning) service, as well as at the Minha (afternoon) service as the Yahrzeit period ends*. During these services, the name of your loved one is blessed by the clergy. You can find the schedule for minyan services at pasyn.org/worship/minyan.

*If your loved one's Yahrzeit coincides with Shabbat, you will have the opportunity to say Kaddish Friday night at Kabbalat Shabbat services as well as during Shabbat Morning Services.

In addition to saying Kaddish, we remember our loved ones through tzedakah (charity) and good deeds. PAS members will receive a reminder about their Yahrzeit observances from our office if the loved one's date of death has been provided. To provide Yahrzeit information to PAS, please contact honors@pasyn.org.

Yizkor (Memorial Service)

The Jewish calendar includes four opportunities to remember the dead and to say Kaddish. These Yizkor services are held on Yom Kippur, Shemini Atzeret, the last day of Pesach, and the second day of Shavuot. It is traditionally a time for those who have lost a loved one to recite memorial prayers and Kaddish. It is customary to light a Yahrzeit candle the night before the Yizkor service (without reciting a blessing).



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WITH YOU ON YOUR JEWISH JOURNEY

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