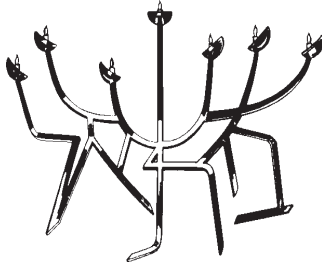


# *Death and Mourning Customs*



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Beth El Synagogue  
14506 California Street  
Omaha, NE 68154-1951  
402-492-8550

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## **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 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 was written to provide an understanding of customs as observed at Beth El. It is offered to guide our members and explain our traditions.

### **What To Do When a Death Occurs**

Call the Jewish Funeral Home to arrange for proper care of the deceased. 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.

Contact Rabbi Drazen 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.

## Before the Funeral

Set time and place of the funeral **with Rabbi Drazen** and the Funeral home. Although our tradition prefers having the funeral as soon as possible after death occurs, there are times when a delay is proper. The service can be held at graveside or the Synagogue. Telephone immediate family, close friends and employer or business colleagues.

Once the funeral time has been set, 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. Pallbearers are necessary when a funeral is held at the Synagogue; they are optional for a graveside service. Six 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.

You will need to discuss the eulogy with the officiating Rabbi. Be open and give as much personal insight as possible. Avoid false or exaggerated praise. Tell the good things enthusiastically; remember to mention what might be best left unsaid.

**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 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. Cremation is **not** in keeping with Jewish tradition. Before the *met*, the deceased, is dressed for burial, we observe the ritual of *tahara*, of ritual washing, done by the *hevra kadisha*, the Holy Society. We dress the body only in traditional burial shrouds,

*takhrikhin*, which are simple white garments. It is customary to bury a man in a *tallit* which he used during his lifetime, with one of the *tzitzit* removed. The *tallit* should be brought to the funeral home. No other objects are buried with the dead.

### **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 Rabbi Drazen for further information.

### **Embalming**

Jewish tradition frowns on embalming. In rare circumstances it might be required by law. Rabbi Drazen 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 charity. If flowers are sent, share them with the living by giving them to the Blumkin Home, 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 centuriesold symbol of inner grief and mourning. 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, 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 *brakha* which is a reaffirmation of faith and the value of life, "*Barukh ata adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam, dayan ha-emet.*" An initial cut is made and then the mourner takes the edges and tears it some. The torn garment or ribbon is worn for *shivah*, except on Shabbat. For parents, the ribbon is worn or the cut is made on the left side. For all others, the *kriah* is on the right side.

### **The Funeral Service**

A funeral can be held at graveside or the Synagogue. A service held only at graveside includes the same elements as those begun at another location. It is shorter because certain elements are repeated when a service is held in two 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*, which expresses our faith in the immortality of the soul, is recited on most days. Once at graveside, the service consists of recitation of *tziduk ha-din*, 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, "*Ha-makom yinakhem et-khem betokh she-ar aveilei tziyon veyerushalayim*, May God comfort you among all the 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 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. 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.

### **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 Rabbi Drazen for further details.

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 family and friends for the mourners, is **not** meant to serve as a social 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 party-like atmosphere should not be allowed to develop.

The menu for this meal traditionally includes hard-boiled eggs, a symbol of life, and round food, such as lentils, which symbolize the turning of the wheel of life, with its ups and downs. Neither meat nor wine, two symbols of joy, should be served at this meal.

### **Sitting Shivah**

Mourners should try to stay together at the place where *shivah* is observed. If they cannot, they may sleep in their own homes and return to the *shivah* 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 while. Rabbi Drazen can contact an employer to explain the practice and make arrangements for someone to miss work.

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

There are a number of practices associated with observing *shivah*. A seven-day candle (provided by Beth El in the case *siddurim*) is lit upon returning from the cemetery. (It should be placed in a fire-proof holder, such as a bowl or pie plate, before lighting.)

Mourners refrain from sexual relations and avoid forms of entertainment, such as television, 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 are encouraged to observe the customs of not wearing shoes and sitting on low stools during *shivah*, which show that we change the way we live during this time.

### **Visiting Mourners**

People pay "*shivah* 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 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 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.**

### **Shivah Services**

It is traditional to hold services at a house of *shivah*. Beth El provides a case of *siddurim* with *kipot* for use in homes. Family members or friends can lead the service. Service times are set with Rabbi Drazen. If a family does not have morning and evening services in the home during the week of *shivah*, it is proper to attend services at the Synagogue and then return home. During *shivah*, mourners attend Shabbat services at the Synagogue: Friday evening, Saturday morning and evening.

### **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**

Anyone who feels close to the deceased may elect to say *kaddish*. However, children are obligated to say *kaddish*, as are parents who lose a child. Saying *kaddish* is especially helpful to surviving spouses since it offers both regularity in life and social contact with others at a disconcerting time.

When the mourning period is a year, *kaddish* is recited for eleven months and a day. One can choose, and it is appropriate to do so, to say *kaddish* for the full year, even if the obligation is only for thirty days. At Beth El, both sons and daughters share the obligation to recite *kaddish*, which can be said morning and evening at our daily services. If it is not possible to attend services twice daily, efforts should be made to say *kaddish* on a regular basis,

once a day or at least on Shabbat.

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*.

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 and to see that they are not alone in grief. For those reasons, recitation of *kaddish* is important.

### **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 a year before having the ceremony. For more information about a dedication service, or to get a copy of our booklet with appropriate prayers and readings for an unveiling, scontact Rabbi Drazen.

### ***Yahrzeit***

*Yahrzeit* is observed each year on the date of death 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 the deceased are read at the appropriate evening service and at the Friday evening service the week before the *Yahrzeit*, if those who observe *Yahrzeit* are present and request it.

The *Yahrzeit* observance lasts a full day and it is customary to attend services on the evening *Yahrzeit* begins as well as the morning and afternoon of the next day. 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 charity on *Yahrzeit*. The Synagogue notification form may be used in order to make such a contribution.

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 charity 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*, *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 Beth El, families have the opportunity to establish a Named Endowment Fund in memory of the deceased. Once the fund reaches a minimum balance, the principal is held in perpetuity as an ongoing memorial. The family may suggest areas for which the income of the fund may be used. Our Executive Director or Rabbi Drazen can provide you with further details.

### **Yahrzeit Plaques**

The Synagogue has *Yahrzeit* tablets with plaques recording the Hebrew and English name of the deceased and the Hebrew date of death. For further information about *Yahrzeit* plaques, 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 long-lasting grief, mourners are urged to speak with Rabbi Drazen 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.

## Glossary

- Anninut:** The period of time between death and the funeral. See page 4.
- Avel:** The Hebrew term for a mourner after the funeral. Before burial the term **onen** is used. See page 4.
- Hevra Kadisha:** Literally, The Holy Society. A group of individuals who prepare a body for burial. See page 5.
- Kriah:** Tearing of a garment or ribbon as a sign of mourning. See page 5.
- Met:** Literally, the dead one. The Hebrew term for the deceased.
- Nihum Avelim:** The mitzvah of consoling the mourners. See page 8.
- Onen:** Hebrew term for a survivor between the time of death and the funeral. See page 4.
- Shivah:** Literally, seven. The name given to the first stage of mourning which begins after the funeral. See page 7.
- Shloshim:** Literally, thirty. The second stage of mourning which lasts for thirty days after the funeral. See page 8.
- Tahara:** Literally, cleansing. The Ritual washing of the body, performed by the Hevra Kadisha. See page 5.
- Takhrikhin:** Shrouds. The traditional burial garments. See page 5.
- Yahrzeit:** The anniversary of the date of death according to the Hebrew calendar. See page 9 for details.
- Yizkor:** The Memorial service. See page 10 for details.

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