

When a Loved One Dies



**By Rabbi David Rosen
Senior Rabbi
Congregation Beth Yeshurun
Houston, Texas**

Shalom

This pamphlet has been prepared for members of Congregation Beth Yeshurun and reflects the practices of the congregation and the Conservative Movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards. Whenever a question arises, the reader is urged to speak with his or her officiating Rabbi.

Any of Beth Yeshurun's Rabbis are happy to help any member at a time of loss. Members of the Synagogue are welcome to contact the desired Rabbi directly using the *Important Numbers* at the end of this pamphlet.

When A Death Occurs

When a loved one dies, the Rabbi and one of the local Jewish funeral homes (see *Important Numbers*, below) should be notified so that together all necessary arrangements can be made.

Judaism requires burial to take place as soon as possible. This generally means burial the day after death. However, exceptions are made for extenuating circumstances (for example, if a child is in a distant city).

Upon notification, the Rabbi will contact the bereaved family and arrange for a personal visit.

If a death takes place on the Sabbath or a Festival, the Rabbi should be informed either in person or through a message on his or her home or synagogue voice mail. It will generally not be possible to visit with the Rabbi until the end of the Sabbath. The funeral home will in the interim make preliminary arrangements, which the Rabbi will confirm as quickly as possible.

If you need to acquire a plot in the Beth Yeshurun Cemetery, you should telephone Mr. Luis Dorfman, the Executive Director of Congregation Beth Yeshurun (see *Important Numbers*, below).

Responsibilities of the Onen

In the time period between a death and burial, the mourner is called an Onen. The Onen has no religious responsibilities except for the arrangements of the funeral. Mourners are exempt from putting on tallit or tefillin, and need not attend any religious services.

The Onen should cover all mirrors; this indicates the lack of concern with one's own appearance. The Onen refrains from wearing leather clothing, including leather shoes, since these are considered signs of luxury.

The Onen refrains from drinking wine and liquor (except on Shabbat or a Festival), and avoids wearing cosmetics and perfumes, and from shaving.

The Onen should not discuss or be concerned with business matters, where at all possible. Television viewing, along with other diversions, should be avoided so the mourner's thoughts can be focused on the deceased.

Prior To The Funeral

Each of the Houston Jewish funeral homes has a selection of kosher caskets. Ritually, Judaism only requires a plain wooden coffin.

Do not feel obligated to select an expensive casket. Instead, if you wish to do something meaningful for the departed, select an appropriate charity (such as the synagogue) and establish a memorial fund in memory of the deceased.

Consistent with Jewish tradition and practice, Jewish funerals in Houston are typically graveside.

A funeral service may be arranged in the Great Sanctuary of Beth Yeshurun upon special request.

Regardless where the service takes place, everything is done that is required for a kosher funeral.

While the deceased is in the custody of the funeral home, arrangements will be made for the Chevra Kadisha (Holy Society) to come and prepare the body for burial, in accordance with Jewish law.

Taharah, the cleansing of the body, will be performed, and the body will be dressed in a shroud (a simple white garment).

Embalming is prohibited under Jewish law, as are routine autopsies. However, extenuating circumstances do at times permit both procedures; consult with the Rabbi.

Cremation is contrary to Jewish law and tradition. If a body is to be cremated, our Rabbis will conduct a memorial service (with a eulogy) in the presence of the body in the funeral home or synagogue; they will not accompany the ashes to the cemetery nor officiate at their interment.

In the case of a man, a tallit may be wrapped around his shoulders. This may be the tallit he wore in life, or a different one purchased just for the occasion.

Arrangements may be made through the funeral home for a Shomer (Watchman) to sit with the deceased throughout the night until the funeral service begins.

Public display of the body is seen as disrespectful to the deceased and is strictly forbidden by Jewish law. The family may arrange for a private viewing before the funeral service begins.

Who Is A Mourner?

Those individuals who are considered mourners (and thereby obligated to wear the Keriah ribbon and recite the Mourners' Kaddish) under Jewish law are:

- a son
- a daughter
- a husband
- a wife
- a father
- a mother
- a brother (including half-brother)
- a sister (including half-sister)

There is no formal obligation to wear the Keriah ribbon or say the Mourners' Kaddish for adoptive parents, siblings or children; one may do so on a voluntary basis, however, and this is highly encouraged.

Girls under 12 years old, and boys under 13 are not obligated to observe most of the laws of mourning. (See *Young Children and Mourning*, below)

Burial In A Jewish Cemetery

The only persons who can be buried in a Jewish cemetery are individuals who are Jewish.

A Jew is defined as one who is born of a Jewish mother, or who has converted to Judaism.

Length Of Mourning

Children are obligated to mourn their parents for one year. All other family relationships are marked by a 30-day mourning period.

The Shivah and Sheloshim mourning periods begin on the day of *burial*. (The Yahrzeit, on the other hand, is observed in subsequent years on the anniversary of the day the person *died*.)

Young Children And Mourning

One of the most difficult questions parents often have to face is whether or not to bring young children to a funeral and in other ways to include them in the mourning process.

Thanks to television, even young children have a remarkable sophistication these days about death and dying, and attempts (however well-intentioned) to shield them are often more problematic than helpful.

If a child was close to the deceased, there will be a definite need for the child to work through his or her own grieving. Numerous books are available to assist parents; these can be found in most libraries, including the Beth Yeshurun Library. (See *Suggested Readings*, below.)

In general, most children who were close to the deceased will want to attend the service, and in most cases this is probably appropriate. If it is decided to bring the child to the graveside, the matter should be carefully and clearly discussed beforehand. The child should be assigned to a responsible adult, who can sensitively answer any questions the child might raise during the ceremony.

Girls under 12 and boys under 13 are not required to formally mourn. They may do so, however, on a voluntary basis, consistent with their sense of loss and their level of maturity.

The Funeral Service

The Keri'ah ribbon is cut immediately before the service begins. The cutting is preceded by a blessing which affirms our faith in God even in the face of our painful loss.

Children of the deceased wear the Keri'ah ribbon on the left side (over their heart); all other mourners, including spouses, wear the ribbon on the right side.

The funeral service consists of selected psalms and readings from Jewish literature, and lasts about 30 minutes. The centerpiece of the service is the eulogy delivered by the Rabbi. The eulogy is based on the Rabbi's own knowledge of the deceased as well as information provided by the family.

At the cemetery, members of the family are invited to assist in the interment.

Following the burial, the family returns to the house of Shivah to receive the condolences of family and friends.

It is customary to ritually wash one's hands after being in close proximity to the deceased. This may take place at the cemetery as one leaves or at the Shivah house upon one's arrival. The mourning family often arranges for a pitcher of water, a bowl, and a roll of paper towels to be placed at the entrance to the Shivah house. (No blessing accompanies the washing.)

At The House Of Mourning

Upon returning from the cemetery, it is customary to eat a Meal of Condolence. This meal (and any other refreshments) should be prepared by one's relatives and friends; it is not an obligation of the mourning family to provide food and refreshments for guests.

The Meal of Condolence may be dairy or meat; typically, hard-boiled eggs (which symbolize life and hope) are served.

The mourners should sit on objects which are lower than the usual height, such as a stool; in this way, we symbolically sit closer to the earth where the deceased now resides.

Shivah

Shivah (the Hebrew word for seven) begins on the return home from the funeral. Shivah is traditionally sat at the home of the deceased, though it may be sat elsewhere if this is not feasible. During Shivah, mourners do not visit the cemetery.

A memorial candle is lit in each house where Shivah is being sat; no blessing accompanies the lighting. The candle will burn seven days, and should be placed in an area where it cannot be accidentally knocked-over or disturbed.

Following the return from the cemetery, a service often takes place in the Shivah home, using prayer books brought to the house from the Synagogue. Two candles are lit whenever services are conducted in the home; Shabbat candles may be used. (No blessing is recited.)

Our congregation welcomes men and women to participate in the Shivah service. The Synagogue will be happy to arrange services to the extent desired throughout the Shivah week. Some families prefer to attend services in the J.B. Greenfield Chapel at Beth Yeshurun each morning and evening; service times can be found in each issue of "The Message," or by speaking with the Rabbi.

The counting of Shivah follows the tradition that any part of a day counts as a whole day; therefore, if Shivah begins on a Monday afternoon, then Monday is the first day, Tuesday the second, Wednesday the third, Thursday the fourth, Friday the fifth, Saturday the sixth, and one hour of sitting on Sunday morning is the seventh.

The traditional period of mourning is seven days. The week-long mourning period has proven itself over the last 2,000 years as psychologically and emotionally beneficial, and families are encouraged to follow this pattern in working through their own grief.

The end of Shivah is marked by the mourners taking a brief stroll around the block, as a sign they are returning to a normal life.

All of the requirements of the Onen (described above) apply to the mourner during the seven days of Shivah, except that mourners do have the obligation to participate in services and to wear tallit and tefillin.

Shivah On Shabbat And Festivals

Shivah is not observed on the Sabbath, beginning one hour before sunset on Friday, and continuing until one hour past sunset on Saturday. During this time, the Keriah ribbon is not worn, wine may be drunk, and the mourner is encouraged to attend Shabbat services in the Synagogue.

During Shivah (even if it has just begun), if one of the following Festival days begins, the remaining days of Shivah are cancelled: Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Pesach and Shavuot.

Mourners may attend Purim services to hear the Book of Esther read, and may light Hanukkah candles in their homes.

Funerals During Passover And Sukkot

If a funeral takes place during the Intermediate Days (Chol HaMoed) of Passover or Sukkot, the Keriah ribbon is cut and the memorial candle is lit, but the start of Shivah is deferred until the last day of the Festival.

Sheloshim

Sheloshim (30) follows Shivah, and includes within its count the seven days of Shivah. The period ends on the morning of the 30th day following burial.

Sheloshim is marked by the recitation of Kaddish each day, and an avoidance of unusually-festive occasions. Mourners may attend all religious services, including weddings, Bar- or Bat-Mitzvah services, and Purim, but one should avoid the celebrations which may follow. If in doubt, consult the Rabbi.

The end of Sheloshim concludes mourning for all relatives except one's parents.

Year-Long Mourning Observances

The period of mourning for one's parents is one Jewish calendar year from the date of death (not burial). In a Jewish leap year (which has 13 months), mourning lasts only through the first 12.

The one-year mourning period is marked by the recitation of the Mourners' Kaddish, and by paying closer-than-normal attention to educational, charitable and religious matters in the Temple and community.

According to Jewish tradition, the deceased are potentially under Divine judgment for 12 months following their death; however, only those who are wicked need this much time to be judged. Since we assume our parents do not fall into that category, the practice in most communities is to recite the Kaddish for only 11 months, as a sign of faith that our parents have already been judged as the beloved people they were. The 11-months (minus-one-day) is counted from the day of death.

Conduct Of Visitors At A Shivah House

A condolence call is a mitzvah, which should be conducted with reverence and dignity. One should not engage in idle talk with the bereaved family or other guests.

It is a mitzvah to bring food for the mourners to eat and to share with their guests. (Be certain to check in advance if the Shivah home is Kosher.)

Do not expect the mourners to rise and greet you. The best thing to say to a mourner is a simple "I'm sorry about your loss."

A good visit is usually a short one; visitors who stay longer than 30-45 minutes often are overstaying their welcome.

Do not expect to be served food or refreshments; rather than expect to be served when you come to visit, it is more appropriate for you to bring food or refreshments when you come.

Yahrzeit

Yahrzeit is a Yiddish work meaning "Year's Time." We remember the departed on the anniversary of their death, according to the Jewish calendar.

On the eve of the Yahrzeit, a Yahrzeit candle is lit in one's home; the Mourners' Kaddish is recited in the synagogue; we may wish to visit the gravesite; and we give a donation to the Synagogue or another charity in memory of our loved one.

Yizkor

Yizkor is a memorial service which is recited four times each year: on Yom Kippur, Shemini Azeret, the last day of Passover, and the second day of Shavuot.

On the eve of each Yizkor, a single candle should be lit in memory of all those family members who have passed away. Yizkor candles are widely available, and burn 24 hours.

One may begin saying Yizkor for a loved one on the first Yizkor after the death; there is no requirement in Jewish law (as is commonly and erroneously believed) for an individual to wait for three Yizkor periods to pass.

Gravestones

The family should arrange for a monument to be placed at the grave of the deceased. Ordinarily, a gravestone includes both the English and Hebrew names and dates.

To be certain the stone or marker is cut with the correct Hebrew spelling, the Rabbi should be consulted before final approval is given.

Unveilings

Judaism requires the placement of a marker on a Jewish gravesite. Simple markers are sufficient, with both English and Hebrew lettering.

The “unveiling” of the monument may take place any time after 30 days from the date of burial; typically, an unveiling will take place within the first year.

Families should be certain the stone or marker is finished and in place before the unveiling ceremony is scheduled; it is not uncommon for production of some markers to take several months.

The unveiling date should be cleared with the Beth Yeshurun Office, which will arrange for the marker to be properly “veiled” for the ceremony.

Inasmuch as unveilings are not required by Jewish law, a formal ceremony with the Rabbi or Cantor is optional. Families who wish the Rabbi and/or Cantor to officiate should reserve dates well in advance. Families who wish to conduct their own service may use a text prepared by Rabbi Rosen, and available from the Rabbi’s Office.

Etiquette At The Cemetery

The cemetery is equivalent to a Holy Sanctuary. Men should always have their heads covered. Food and drink are inappropriate, as are flowers (see above, “Burial in a Jewish Cemetery”).

Pre-Need Arrangements

It is often desirable to make arrangements for one’s funeral or the funeral of a loved one before the need arises. It is not tempting fate to make such arrangements; it is, to the contrary, a thoughtful and wise procedure, consistent with Jewish law and tradition.

In the event there are no prior arrangements, the burden falls upon the mourners to accept this responsibility at a time when they are already emotionally taxed.

One can arrange with our Cemetery Committee to purchase plots in the Beth Yeshurun Cemeteries; when the need arises, the gravesite can then be readied without further paperwork. Houston's Jewish funeral homes will be happy to help make all other advance arrangements.

IMPORTANT NUMBERS

Congregation Beth Yeshurun
4525 Beechnut Blvd.
Houston, TX 77096
(713) 666-1881
Fax (713) 666-7767
www.bethyeshurun.org

Funeral Homes Serving the Jewish Community

Claire Bros. Funeral Directors
(713) 271-7250

Houston Jewish Funerals
(713) 666-0257
www.houstonjewishfunerals.com

David Funeral Directors
(713) 861-2861

Levy Funeral Directors
(713) 660-6633

Kosher Food Tray

Kroger - W. Bellfort
(713) 721-7691

Randall's - W. Bellfort
(713) 721-0011

Nosher - JCC
(713) 729-3200

Susie's Grill
(713) 729-5741

Michael Greenberg
(713) 774-1078

SUGGESTED READINGS

For Adults:

- *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, by Harold Kushner
- *What Helped Me When My Loved One Died*, by Earl Grollman
- *Why Me? Why Anyone?*, by Hirshel Jaffe, Marcia and James Rudin
- *A Gift of Hope*, by Robert Veninga
- *Living Through Personal Crisis*, by Ann Kaiser Stearns
- *The Bereaved Parent*, by Harriet Sarnoff Schiff

For Children:

- *Zeydeh*, by Moshe Halevi Spero
- *About Dying: An Open Family Book for Parents and Children*, by Sara Bonnett Stein
- *Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child*, by Earl Grollman
- *Explaining Death to Children*, by Earl Grollman