

A Brief Guide to Jewish Burial and Mourning Customs

(Updated February 23, 2015)

Judaism requires that we honor the dead and comfort the mourner. This brief guide will outline some of the main traditions that Jews generally follow.

1. ***Chevra Kadisha***

Many communities or synagogues have a *chevra kadisha*, a burial society. This group will facilitate the funeral arrangements and work in consultation with the family, rabbi or other Jewish person who will be helping with the funeral. When a *chevra kadisha* is not available another Jewish knowledgeable person can assist.

2. **Washing the Body (*Tahara*) and Dressing the Body**

A ritual washing may be performed by people of the same gender as the deceased. Normally family members do not participate. After the washing the deceased is generally dressed in a shroud. All of us are created equal and so the simplicity of the shroud symbolizes that we recognize our common humanity. The body is then placed in coffin. The coffin is usually made of wood. Wood naturally decomposes while a metal coffin would prevent the body from “returning” to the earth. Similarly embalming is not performed which would retard decomposition.

3. **Watching the Body (*Shmurah*)**

Some families will request that the *chevra kadisha* arrange for people to sit with the body between the time after the washing to the time of the funeral. This is another way to honor the dead by having someone present until burial.

4. **Cutting of Black Ribbon (*Keriah*)**

Before the funeral starts mourners meet privately with the rabbi or officiant and a torn ribbon is pinned on to their clothing as a sign of bereavement. This is reminiscent of the actual tearing of garments which used to be done and in many Orthodox synagogues it is still done. After the ribbon or clothing is torn the mourners will say in Hebrew and in English: “Blessed are You O Lord, the righteous Judge.”

5. **The Funeral Service**

Funerals can take place in the synagogue, funeral home, or wherever the mourners wish to hold the service. Sometimes there will be just a simple service at the grave site. There is no standard funeral service although most Jewish funerals will have these elements.

- Readings from Jewish tradition usually including Psalm 23 with its well-known verse “*The Lord is my Shepherd...*”
- A eulogy delivered by the rabbi, family members and/or other friends delineating the deceased’s life and accomplishments. One of the functions of the eulogy is to teach the living that we can remember the deceased by living our lives as our departed lived theirs.
- The recitation of the memorial prayer *El Maleh Rahamim* (God Full of Compassion.) This prayer asks God to grant perfect peace to the departed and to remember the many righteous deeds s/he performed. The Hebrew name of the deceased is inserted in the prayer.
- Mourner’s Kaddish – mourners will recite this ancient prayer which reaffirms our belief in the greatness of God. In some communities it is only recited at the grave site.

6. At the Grave Site

At the grave site a few more readings from Jewish tradition are read. Afterwards *El Male Rahamim* may be recited a second time and then the mourners will recite the Mourner's Kaddish. Then mourners and those in attendance are invited to fill the grave with dirt - first the mourners and then others in attendance. In some communities those attending or just the *chevra kadisha* will stay until the grave is completely filled and in other communities only until the coffin is covered.

7. Meal of Condolence

The Meal of Condolence is arranged by the *chevra kadisha* or friends of the family. It is usually held in the home of the deceased or one of the mourners but can be held anywhere the family wishes. The thought behind this is that the mourners should not have to worry about the preparation of meals after a funeral. A period of mourning starts called *shiva* which is observed anywhere from three to seven days depending on which tradition is followed.

After leaving the cemetery or before going in to the Meal of Condolence many people will wash their hands. In ancient days contact with the dead was considered to make a person ritually impure. Today the washing of the hands can be seen as an act of spiritual cleansing. A pitcher of water and a basin are set out in a table in front of the place where the Meal of Condolences is being held for those who wish to wash their hands before entering.

Each mourner will be given a *shiva* candle – a special candle which is lit immediately after the funeral in the home. It burns for seven days – the full length of the shiva period.

At some point during the Meal of Condolence everyone will gather together for one of the three statutory services recited during the day which concludes with the Mourner's Kaddish. Depending on which tradition the mourners follow, mourners Kaddish will be recited from three to seven days at one or more of these daily services.

Closing Note

This is just a very brief summary of Jewish funeral traditions. As in all traditions laws and customs vary from place to place and the above outline does not try to delve into the many issues that may arise. For more information you may contact Rabbi Jeff Portman at Agudas Achim Congregation, 401 E. Oakdale Blvd., Coralville, IA 52241. (319-337-3813).

Zecher Tzadik Livracha

May the Memory of the Righteous Be As A Blessing