

# BEREAVEMENT AND MOURNING

An Introductory Guide for the Time of Grieving

Westchester Jewish Center  
Rockland and Palmer Avenues  
Mamaroneck, New York

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### Introduction

One of the sacred purposes of our synagogue is to reach out with love and support to each of our congregants at the time of need. A time will come in each of our lives when we will be faced with the loss of a loved one. Judaism provides help in these difficult hours. Jewish traditions permit the expression of respect and dignity for the deceased and comfort to the bereaved. It is the purpose of this guide to help prepare for the death of a loved one, either in anticipation of or at the time of the death.

May G-d comfort the bereaved among us together with the mourners of Israel.

### The Laws of Mourning

The Jewish laws of mourning apply to those who experience the death of a **parent, spouse, sibling or child**. In all other cases, no matter how strongly the loss is felt, there is **no obligation** to observe the laws of mourning. Should you nonetheless wish to accept some of the mourning rituals voluntarily, you should consult the Rabbi as to whether and to what extent Jewish law permits you to do so.

### First Steps in the Bereavement Process

Please telephone the Rabbi or Cantor at the synagogue (698-2960) *prior* to making funeral arrangements. Early notification will assist in making the services of the clergy fully available to the family and prevent the possibility of scheduling problems. It also allows the synagogue community to be informed through our phone chain or e-mail system. The Rabbi is best able to counsel the bereaved regarding Jewish law and tradition concerning the funeral and its timing.

The funeral home will take responsibility for all matters in connection with the physical remains: transportation, preparation and supervision of the body, selection of a casket, use of funeral home rooms, contacting the cemetery and, if desired, the preparation and placement of obituaries in the press. Westchester Jewish Center has no official arrangement with any funeral home. In our area the funeral home most often used is Zion Memorial Home (381-1809). However it is best to discuss your choice with the Rabbi.

While the family will be able to use the funeral home's chapel for the funeral service, when a member of the Westchester Jewish Center dies or is a mourner, the Center's sanctuary will also be available for this purpose. In some circumstances, the family may

desire that the service be held “graveside” at the cemetery. Whatever the family’s choice, the funeral home must be contacted to coordinate care and transportation of the body.

## Timing of Funeral and Burial

Jewish law dictates that burial occur as soon as possible - preferably within 24 hours of death. However, there are valid reasons for a delay: transportation of the body, notification of family, compliance with secular laws, and/or restrictions relating to burial on Shabbat or holy days. Nonetheless, the burial should never be delayed more than is absolutely necessary.

### *Aninut* – Between Death and Burial

- ***Onen*- The Bereaved**

Between the time of death and the funeral, a person who is subject to the laws of mourning is referred to as an *onen*. An *onen* is exempt from the performance of affirmative religious obligations and should refrain from drinking wine, eating meat or indulging in pleasurable activity. During this period the focus should be on preparation for the funeral. *Kaddish* is not recited during this period, and does not begin until the time of burial.

- ***Shmira* (Keeping Watch)**

To ensure *k’vod ha-met* (respect for the dead), Jewish tradition encourages that the body of the deceased be attended constantly prior to burial. Customarily, a *shomer* (guardian) is engaged through the funeral home, although it is preferable for *shomrim* to be members of the family or friends of the deceased. While the *shomer* guards the body, *tehillim* (psalms) are recited.

- **Autopsy**

The principle of *k’vod ha-met* dictates against routine autopsies. These are viewed as a desecration of the body. Autopsy is permitted, however, when required by secular law or under circumstances in which medical knowledge may be gained to help the living. It is advisable to talk to the Rabbi before making this decision.

- **Organ Donation**

Pursuant to the principle of *pekuach nefesh* (saving a life), there is no greater mitzvah than to bring healing to the living. Thus, the donation of an organ of the deceased for transplant is permissible.

- **Cremation**

Cremation is not consistent with the principle of *k’vod ha-met*. Accordingly, cremation is inappropriate under Jewish law. Please consult the Rabbi for guidance if cremation becomes an issue.

- **Embalming**

Jewish law mandates that the body be permitted to return to its source naturally. Accordingly, neither embalming nor the use of cosmetics is permitted unless required by secular law.

- **Tahara (Ritual Cleansing and Purification)**

The principle of *k'vod ha-met* prescribes that the deceased be washed and cleansed in accordance with a ritual (*tahara*) venerated by long Jewish tradition and marked by the recitation of prayer and psalms. Customarily, appropriate personnel, the *Hevra Kadisha*, are engaged by the funeral home to perform this mitzvah.

- **Halbasha (Burial Attire)**

The age-old Jewish principle of inherent equality of all in death prescribes that the body be dressed solely in shrouds (*tachrichim*)—simple white linen similar to the garment worn by the High Priest in the Temple on Yom Kippur. Additionally, the deceased may be dressed in his or her own *talit* and a *kipah*.

- **Casket**

Just as embalming is prohibited to permit natural processes to occur, so must the casket (*aron*) be made wholly of wood. Traditionally plain pine is used. Neither nails nor metal of any kind may be utilized. Again, Jewish tradition emphasizes the inherent equality of all persons in death. This is not a time for expressions of ostentation. Simplicity is encouraged in the selection of a casket.

- **Visitation and Display**

Judaism encourages us to remember the deceased as they were in life. Therefore, the practice of visitation in the funeral home prior to the day of the funeral is contrary to Jewish law. Likewise, any display of the body or “open casket” is alien to Jewish tradition.

- **Kriah (Rending the Garment)**

The act of rending a garment by a mourner is a visible sign of grief. Immediately prior to the funeral service, as the garment is torn, the Rabbi leads the mourners in the recitation of a blessing.

Traditionally, a piece of clothing is torn. Nowadays, the funeral home provides a black ribbon, which is pinned to the clothes and may be substituted for tearing the actual garment. In either case, the torn textile is to be worn throughout the 7-day mourning period (*shiva*), except on Shabbat. The tear should be on the left side over the heart for parents. For all others, the tear should be on the right side.

### **A Note about the Funeral Home**

For legal and ritual reasons, the funeral director will need specific information about the deceased. Upon your meeting, be prepared to give the legal name, Hebrew name, usual home address, birthplace, social security number and parents' names. Additional

information may be requested for obituaries. If there is a cemetery plot already purchased, bring information about the location especially if it is located within a burial society. The Director will obtain permits from the state and may need a permit from the Conservator of the Burial Society if applicable. Keep in mind that arrangements with a specific funeral home can be made on a “pre-need” basis. This eliminates the necessity of last minute decisions made during a difficult or emotional time.

## The Funeral Service

The Rabbi officiates and leads the mourners in prayer, a selection from the Psalms and the chanting of the traditional memorial prayer, *El Malei Rachamim*. The Rabbi encourages individuals selected by the family to deliver eulogies (*hesped*) to the deceased. Speaking about the life of the deceased serves to keep in mind his or her legacy.

Flowers at the funeral and gravesite are not in accord with Jewish tradition and practice. Instead, Judaism encourages *tzedakah*, contributions to charitable causes in memory of the deceased. The family may wish to provide the Rabbi with a list of preferred charities, which the Rabbi will announce during the service.

## Burial

“For dust you are and unto dust shall you return.” (Genesis 3:19)

Accompanying the dead to their final resting place and participating in the burial are great *mitzvot*. Jewish tradition calls for the mourners to be present as the casket is lowered into the grave. Prayers are recited, including, for the first time, Kaddish. It is traditional, and an act of great righteousness, for the mourners and those in attendance each to participate in the act of fully covering the casket with the dirt. This simple, symbolic act is designed to make us understand the reality and finality of death and to help us begin to heal. As the mourners withdraw from the grave, it is also customary for family and friends to form two parallel rows between which the mourners walk and receive traditional expressions of consolation. Thereafter, either upon leaving the cemetery or before entering the house of mourning, it is traditional to wash one’s hands.

Westchester Jewish Center owns a section of the Glenville Cemetery located in Glenville, CT about twelve miles from Mamaroneck. The Cemetery Association of the synagogue can give you information about the cemetery and purchasing plots beforehand or at the time of death. This information is available through the synagogue office (914) 698-2960 or by calling the Rabbi.

## The Mourning Period – *Shiva*

*Shiva* means “seven” and refers to the seven-day period of intensive mourning that commences with the day of burial and ends on the morning of the seventh day thereafter.

Shiva is not publicly observed on Shabbat but that day is counted in the seven. Certain holy days may foreshorten the *shiva*. The Rabbi will advise the family if the *shiva* is to be terminated early for this reason.

- **Purpose**

The purpose of the mourning period is to give the mourners the opportunity to grieve and to come to terms with their loss. During *shiva*, mourners remain at home (with the exception of *Shabbat* and holy days), temporarily removed from normal day-to-day activities, as friends and family comfort them while they attempt to adjust to life anew.

- **The Place of Mourning**

It is important that a distinction be drawn between a house of *shiva* and a place of normal social interaction. As expressions of mourning, it is customary in a house of *shiva* for mirrors to be covered and for a seven-day memorial candle (provided by the funeral home) to be kindled without a blessing. Customarily a pitcher of water is placed outside the house for mourners to wash their hands upon returning from the cemetery.

- **Commencement of *Shiva***

*Shiva* is customarily commenced with a meal of consolation (*seudat havra-ah*) prepared by friends and family as the mourners return from the cemetery. This meal traditionally includes food that is round, such as hard-boiled eggs, to symbolize the circle of life. As with all meals during the *shiva*, even in homes that do not ordinarily observe the laws of *kashrut*, all food should be kosher. The *Bichur Cholim* committee of WJC will gladly provide meals for mourners. A member of the committee will contact the family before or during *shiva*.

- **Conduct during *Shiva***

Ordinarily, mourners should not leave the house of mourning during the week of *Shiva*, except to attend services. During *shiva*, mourners customarily sit upon lower chairs, benches or boxes which the funeral home or Westchester Jewish Center will provide. It is also customary for the mourners to refrain from wearing leather shoes and for males to refrain from shaving. Mourners must not consider themselves as hosts who are obligated to entertain guests during the period of mourning. They do not need to serve food or make small talk with visitors. Ideally, discussions should focus on the deceased and on allowing visitors to console mourners.

Placing photographs, wedding, bar/bat mitzvah or other photo albums and copies of eulogies or other relevant writings help focus attention and discussion on the deceased.

During public visitation times, it is inappropriate for TV, computers or music to be seen or heard in the rooms where *shiva* is being observed.

- **Religious Services during *Shiva***

To the extent the family desires, evening services may be conducted at the home. Special prayer books used during *shiva* are available and will be provided by the congregation.

Prior to the funeral, the family should discuss with the Rabbi whether and which services to conduct at the home.

Congregants choosing not to *daven* at home may attend the daily morning and evening services held at the synagogue. Likewise, on Shabbat, when *shiva* is suspended, mourners attend services at the synagogue on Friday evening, Saturday morning and Saturday evening. *Kaddish* is recited with those present. At the end of the *Kabalat Shabbat* on Friday evening mourners leave the chapel to be escorted back in with the Rabbi in order to receive the consolation of the community.

- **A Note to Non-Mourners: Visiting the Shiva House**

Visiting the mourners in the *shiva* house is an important mitzvah. It is appropriate for visitors to enter the home without ringing the doorbell and to refrain from usual greetings and salutations. Rather it is proper to express condolences and otherwise wait to be addressed by the mourner. The traditional greeting, “May G-d comfort you together with the other mourners of Jerusalem and Zion,” may be said to the mourners upon arriving or leaving the *shiva* house. Discussions should focus on the deceased. If the visitor knew the deceased, the visitor should tell the mourners anecdotes or memories of that person. If the visitor did not know the deceased, the visitor should ask questions of the mourners. The visit should be brief.

When a close friend is the mourner, it is often welcomed to bring meals or help with other household chores or needs. For example when a friend takes a child to school or answers telephone calls, the mourner is more easily released from the distractions of usual daily life.

- **Conclusion of Shiva**

Shiva is concluded one hour after morning minyan on the seventh day after burial. It is customary for the mourners to leave the home and walk around the block as a symbolic gesture that the period of intensive mourning has been completed and that normal life may be resumed.

## Beyond the Shiva

The following topics are a brief overview of the laws and customs regarding respect and remembrance of the deceased. Please consult the Rabbi for more complete details.

- ***Shloshim***

*Shloshim* is the 30-day period of mourning that commences on the day of burial and continues for twenty-three days after the conclusion of *shiva*. During *shloshim*, mourners return to work but refrain from public entertainment and social activities. Mourners continue to be obligated to recite the *Kaddish* daily. The mandated period of mourning a spouse, sibling or child ends with *shloshim*.

- ***Shanah***

*Shanah* (year) is the mandated period of mourning for a deceased parent only. This period commences on the day of burial and continues for eleven Hebrew months. The extended time is part of how we show honor and respect toward our parents. *Kaddish* must be recited daily during this period as mourners continue to refrain from public celebratory entertainment.

- **The Unveiling**

A monument may be erected at the grave at any time. There is no required formal ceremony pursuant to Jewish law. Nonetheless, it is a tradition in many families to conduct a ritual unveiling at which prayers and readings are recited and the unveiled monument is dedicated. More and more, this simple rite is performed without clergy present. In this case, the Rabbi will provide all necessary ritual material to the family. Customarily this rite is performed some time after the conclusion of *shloshim* and before the first *yahrtzeit*. As selection and preparation of a stone may take months, mourners should not delay in beginning these arrangements.

- ***Yahrtzeit***

*Yahrtzeit* (the anniversary of the death) is observed each year on the date of death as marked by the Hebrew calendar. *Kaddish* is recited in the presence of a minyan. On the eve of the *yahrtzeit*, a special candle is kindled, which burns for 24 hours. Many Jews make a visit to the cemetery during this time and it is customary to leave a small stone on the gravestone as a sign of respect. The synagogue office will send out a card in advance as a reminder of the approaching anniversary, and the relative of the deceased will be offered an aliyah on the preceding Shabbat. In addition, *tzedakah* is given in memory of the deceased.

- ***Yizkor* (memorial Service)**

*Yizkor* is observed on *Yom Kippur*, on *Shemini Atzeret*, on the eighth day of Passover and on the second day of *Shavouth*. *Kaddish* is recited during *Yizkor* as we remember our loved ones who have passed from this realm. It is traditional to light a *yahrtzeit* candle on these days as well. Many also visit the cemetery in the days leading up to the High Holidays. *Yizkor* observance begins on the appropriate holy days following the death—even during the period of mourning.

## Conclusion

It is our sincere hope that this Guide will answer many general questions relating to Jewish law and tradition surrounding the death of a loved one. This is a brief guide meant as an overview. It makes no attempt to address the unique circumstances many individuals must confront. Being prepared for the inevitable times of loss is in itself a great comfort. It is suggested that any special situations that are anticipated be discussed with the Rabbi. It is appropriate to discuss known concerns even before the actual time of illness or death.



It is never too early to plan for loved ones or for oneself. Prior arrangements for the funeral and burial help alleviate added stress at the last minute. The Rabbi and the WJC Cemetery Association are available to discuss all aspects of preparation including reserving a gravesite, cemetery regulations and costs.

Please contact the Rabbi to answer specific questions beyond the scope of this Guide. Authoritative books are also available from the library or from the Rabbi that discuss the laws and customs of death and mourning in much greater detail.

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We gratefully acknowledge the Ritual Committee of the Jewish Community Center of Harrison who published a guide for bereavement and mourning for their congregation in 2002. Their hard work and fine ideas helped to make this Guide possible.

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This Guide is dedicated in loving memory of our mothers

Shoshana Ron

Geraldine L. Levitt, M.D.

They taught us so many important things throughout their lives and taught us through their deaths the comfort and importance of knowing these Jewish laws and customs.

Debbie and Aran Ron