

"Give me comfort; give me courage;
turn me to deeds that bless the living."

Gates of Prayer

A Guide for Jewish Funeral Practices



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CONGREGATION**

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Quite often, the loss of a loved one is unexpected, leaving the grieving family unprepared in the days following the death. In response to families who needed guidance, we have created this Guide to help members of our congregation obtain a deeper understanding of the Jewish approach to life and death, specifically the customs which have evolved throughout the centuries concerning death, burial rites and mourning procedures.

Because we are a Reform congregation, this booklet discusses practices and traditions with the understanding that the spirit of the Reform Movement means we do not dictate observance, but rather encourage you to make informed decisions. We suggest our members read through the following traditions and rituals and share their desires and feelings with close relatives. When the time comes, Washington Hebrew Congregation will be here to help you and your family through this difficult time period.

B'Shalom,

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Washington Hebrew Congregation

INTRODUCTION

In Jewish tradition, death is viewed as a normal part of the life cycle. Traditionally, our people have never approached this final chapter of life with dread or fear. It is hoped that a life well-lived will be blessed with length of days; but, whatever the time allotted, our purpose is to fill our days here on earth with love, beauty, concern and compassion.

Judaism believes that we are partners with God. Each of us has a sacred obligation to share in the building of a better world. We hope to leave the world, our family and friends richer and more fulfilled because of our having been here, despite the inevitable end of life we all must face.

The life and death of each individual is unique. Whether young or old, married or single, each has a different biography, each has different relationships. It is often said that "death ends a life but not a relationship." Our connection with a loved one continues after death, and the need to sort out our agenda and our feelings continues day after day, month after month and even year after year. Jewish tradition over the ages has developed a sensitive and sensible approach to death, grief and recovery. Family and friends are usually the most helpful in working through one's grief; however, it is hoped that our rabbis, cantors and Caring Committee may be of assistance.

PREPARING FOR DEATH

The High Holiday liturgy tells us that a person should repent the day before his/her death. The sages comment, "Since no one knows the day of his death, we should repent each day." In other words, we should live every day as though it were our last day, filling our time here on earth with quality and nobility.

The wisdom of the sages surely applies to the preparation for death itself. Since we do not know the day of our death, we should prepare ourselves and our

families so that whenever death occurs, the tasks and burdens that fall to those who survive will be eased.

Pre-planning alleviates the burden of making difficult decisions because the deceased has already expressed his or her desires and given direction to those who survive. We believe it is not maudlin or depressing to talk about these things, but ultimately helpful and useful to all members of the family, young and old. In fact, it is an act of love and concern for the family to raise these questions prior to the death to make sure their loved one's voice is heard. While this conversation may focus on the loved one's desires for the funeral and burial — the spiritual nature of the death — it is also important for the family to make sure they have all essential and practical information that will be needed following the death. This includes Hebrew and English names; parents' names and maiden names; lawyers' and/or financial advisors' names; location of will, safety deposit boxes, birth certificates and other important papers or documents; location of cemetery property and documents, and any funeral pre-arrangement information. Other helpful information might include close relatives' and friends' names and addresses.

The rabbis and cantors are always available to help our congregants, but we offer you this guide to help you prepare for the inevitable moment of death.

Checklist to keep in mind:

Answers to the following questions are provided below.

How do I buy a plot, and where should I buy it?

Is burial in mausoleums permitted according to Jewish Law?

Is cremation allowed?

Is my loved one allowed to donate body organs?

When the death occurs, whom should I contact at the Temple?

How do I choose a funeral director/home?

Where is the funeral service held?

Is there a separate service from the burial?

How soon does the funeral need to take place?
What happens if an autopsy needs to be performed?
Are there requirements regarding the casket?
How should the deceased be prepared for burial?
What clothes should I provide for my loved one?
Should I provide flowers for the funeral?
Does the body of my loved one need to be watched until burial?
Is the casket open or closed during the funeral?
Should I have someone watch the house during the funeral?
What should I wear to the funeral?
What is *kriah* and am I supposed to do this?
Who conducts the service?
How many pallbearers are there?
Who gives the eulogy?
Why do we shovel earth onto the casket?
How long do we sit *shiva*?
Who says *Kaddish*?
When do we place a tombstone?

Burial: In 1852, Washington Hebrew Congregation created a new cemetery on Alabama Avenue in the District of Columbia to help its congregants fulfill the obligation of providing a family burial spot for loved ones. Of course, Jewish tradition permits burial in any appropriately consecrated cemetery and there are numerous cemeteries in the Greater Washington area which are either solely Jewish or which offer Jewish sections in larger secular cemeteries. Washington Hebrew Congregation has two cemeteries, each one unique.

The Washington Hebrew Congregation Memorial Park has served our members since before the founding of the Temple and the drawing of its charter. It is a place of dignity, history and deep religious inspiration. Additionally, the Washington Hebrew Congregation Section of the Garden of Remembrance offers a peaceful, contemplative and beautiful resting place.

If members of our Congregation wish to explore the purchase of a burial plot from Washington Hebrew Congregation, please contact:

Memorial Park – Layne Weiss at 202-362-7100

Garden of Remembrance – Sheldon Grosberg at 301-428-3000

Mausoleums: Jewish law permits burial in mausoleums but stipulates that it is appropriate that the casket be buried in the earth and the mausoleum be built around a burial plot. Reform Judaism does not insist on the precise observance of these stipulations. Washington Hebrew Congregation does have a columbarium, a wall-like structure with recesses for urns or ashes, at both of its cemeteries, and members of our Congregation may acquire a vault in either columbarium.

Cremation: Traditional Judaism does not permit cremation because it disrupts the natural process of "from dust to dust" and interferes with the Orthodox hope for physical resurrection when the Messiah comes. Cremation often carries with it a greater sense of finality or destruction that increases the emotional stress on the family. Jewish tradition deems that burial in the earth is a more natural and fitting way of commemorating a final resting place. It provides the surviving family and friends with a focus of gathering for prayer, meditation and expressing respect to the deceased. Cremation, however, is permitted in Reform practice. This is a matter of personal decision and should be arrived at by the family after careful consideration of all aspects and implications.

Donation of Body Organs: With the development of many modern medical techniques, the possibility of donating organs such as eyes, heart, liver or kidneys, etc. is an important consideration. In keeping with Reform tradition, we believe that it is perfectly appropriate for individuals to express their desires and make such donations.

If there are more detailed questions that people wish to ask in terms of religious considerations, we encourage scheduling appointments for such conversation with one of our rabbis or cantors.

WHEN DEATH OCCURS

When a death occurs, please notify the Temple immediately at 202-362-7100. During business hours, you will be directed to Layne Weiss or, in her absence, Steve Jacober. Layne or Steve will guide you through the process of determining where the funeral will take place, when it will take place and with whom the funeral will take place. If your call is after business hours, the message on the Temple phone will give you a number at which you will be able to reach Layne or Steve. Layne can be reached any time on her cell phone, 301-275-5748, and Steve on his cell phone, 240-778-5227. Together with the family and the funeral home, the determination of appropriate day and time will be made.

Choosing a Funeral Director: The rabbis at Washington Hebrew Congregation conduct funeral services at any of the funeral homes in the Washington area, either at Jewish funeral homes or non-sectarian funeral homes. It is not our practice to recommend a funeral home to our membership since these are private businesses incorporated not only for the purpose of serving people but also for making a profit. We do, however, wish to advise our members that we have a special arrangement with Edward Sagel Funeral Home. To learn more about this arrangement, please call Edward Sagel Funeral Home at 301-217-9400.

The Place of the Funeral Service: The funeral service prior to the interment may take place for any member of Washington Hebrew Congregation in the Kaufmann Sanctuary or the Albert and Shirley Small Chapel. Funeral services may also be held in the chapel of the funeral home. Families who do not wish to have a service prior to the committal service at the cemetery may choose to have a graveside service only.

Time of Service: Traditional Jewish law requires that burial take place within 24 hours after the death. Funeral services, however, are not held on Shabbat, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and the first and last days of the major festivals: Passover, Sukkot and Shavuot. In Reform tradition, the practice is to arrange burial as soon as possible after the death with due regard to travel needs of close relatives.

The tradition of having a burial as soon after death as possible carries with it a wise and perceptive insight into the human psyche. The funeral and burial services are a most difficult time, and delaying the ultimate affirmation of the reality of the death is, in the final analysis, not helpful. The time between death itself and the funeral is an extraordinarily trying time of waiting; therefore, it should not be unnecessarily extended.

Autopsy: Although post-mortem examinations or autopsies are against traditional Jewish law, Reform practice does allow for autopsies. In general, Reform Judaism encourages an autopsy when it might be a source of useful information for the family, scientists, physicians or medical science, or if it could protect the health of survivors who might suffer from a similar ailment. In such cases, Reform tradition conforms to the supreme Jewish principle, preserving life, and would accept an autopsy. This again must be a decision of the family.

FUNERAL ARRANGEMENTS

Choosing a Casket: Traditional Judaism requires that the casket must be completely of wood without any nails or metal handles. The purpose of this is to permit the fulfillment of the injunction "from dust to dust." Metal caskets or concrete burial vaults to contain the coffin are, according to traditional Judaism, a retardation of the natural process and thus are not in keeping with traditional Jewish law.

Reform tradition does, however, allow for alternatives if desired by the family. The cemeteries in the Washington area and most throughout the country may require that vaults be used at the cemetery to protect the surface of the cemetery and grounds as a safety measure for those who walk there. Funeral directors will explain specific requirements.

Preparing and Ritual Cleansing of the Body: Traditional Judaism ordains a ritual cleansing of the body in accordance with the stipulation laid down by the Shulchan Aruch, a code book of Jewish Law. Reform Judaism does not require this practice, but those families who wish to incorporate this tradition may do so at any of the Jewish funeral homes. Families undecided about this practice, as with all other aspects of the funeral arrangements, are encouraged to talk with the rabbi or cantor who will officiate at the service.

Embalming: Since both Jewish Law and Reform practice stress the respect of the human body and encourage an early burial, embalming is not necessary. It is imperative, however, that funeral arrangements be made as soon as possible. Reform tradition leaves the decision of embalming up to the family, but certainly indicates that it is not necessary, particularly when the funeral follows soon after the death.

Burial Attire: Traditional Judaism stipulates burial in a white shroud known as *tachrichim*. In Reform practice, the body need not be buried in a shroud, but rather in whatever clothing the family deems appropriate. Families are encouraged to use simplicity and good judgment in making their decision. In death as in life, observant Jews choose to dress the adult male in a *talit* or *kipah*. The purpose of appropriate dress is to show respect and honor to the deceased.

Flowers and Donations: Traditionally, Jewish funerals have not included flowers. Instead donations to the congregation or to a favorite charity serve as fitting substitutes where individuals wish to give a tangible expression of their sympathy and concern. In Reform Jewish practice today, donations are still the preferred expression of sympathy, however flowers may be included to beautify the service.

Custom of Watching the Body Prior to the Funeral Service: Among traditional Jews, it has become the custom to have persons designated to watch the body after it is properly prepared for burial, until the actual burial itself. The origin of this practice goes back many centuries to a time when it was deemed necessary to protect the body from evil spirits, desecration or robbery during this period of time. Many traditional Jews, and some Reform, observe it today as another means of expressing respect and love for the deceased. This service can be provided by most Jewish funeral homes.

Viewing an Open Casket: Traditional Jewish law does not permit an open casket and the viewing of the deceased by members of the family or friends. Jewish tradition encourages the mourners to remember the deceased as he/she was when he/she was alive. Reform practice follows this idea as well. Further, it is believed that the viewing of the deceased in an open casket may have a negative psychological impact. The tendency is for the mourners to remember the person in the casket rather than as part of the circle of family or friends. In addition,

Jewish tradition emphasizes respect and honor to be shown to the deceased and feels that this is best accomplished without viewing the body in the casket.

House Sitter: In most cases the funeral has been announced in a local paper, thus it is a recommended practice to have a friend or acquaintance stay at your home during the funeral service.

FUNERAL SERVICES

Funeral Attire: In general, the clothing worn to funerals, as to other occasions, is to reflect the mood of the religious observance. In the case of funerals, proper attire, therefore, is to be dignified and somber. Traditionally, black has been worn as a symbol of grief and mourning, but other dark colors are acceptable.

Kriah: Among Conservative and Reform Jews, a black ribbon is worn by members of the immediate family. *Kriah*, an act whereupon the ribbon is torn or cut, symbolizes that a loved one has been torn from the midst of the circle of family love. Traditionally the *kriah* ribbon is worn during *shiva*, the first seven days following burial. In Jewish Law, there are four categories of relatives who are required to wear the black ribbon — child, sibling, parent and spouse. Furthermore, children under age 13, along with other family and friends are not required to perform this rite. Reform tradition, however, invites other family members who are grieving to wear the ribbon.

For some, the *kriah* ribbon is an outward reminder of how one's life has changed once regular life and work have resumed. Thus, some choose to wear the *kriah* ribbon for the first 30 days following burial (*shloshim*) as a reminder to all that he/she is in mourning.

Conduct of Funeral Service: The funeral service may be conducted by any knowledgeable Jew, male or female, not necessarily a rabbi. Traditionally, the chanting of the cantor is accepted, though musical instruments are not included. In Reform practice today, often the cantor is accompanied by an organ or another instrument.

Pallbearers: In biblical tradition, we learn that Jacob's children carried their father to the place of his burial. The practice of close relatives or friends serving as pallbearers continues today. In Reform tradition, both men and women may serve as pallbearers. Six to eight pallbearers are an appropriate number.

If there are more than 8 people you would like to honor as pallbearers, or if there is someone you would like to honor but who is not physically able to walk alongside the casket, we encourage you to consider honorary pallbearers. Honorary pallbearers walk behind the casket before the family and in this manner accompany the casket as it is moved from the service to the gravesite.

Eulogies: Eulogies are not required, but are generally included in the funeral service. These reflections on the life of the deceased are helpful vehicles of grief for the bereaved. Eulogies may be given by any person, clergy, relative or friend — Jew or non-Jew — and the rabbi should be apprised of anyone wishing to speak prior to the funeral. It is also recommended that the remarks be written down.

Turning Earth: Traditional Jews consider it an honor and a duty to participate in shoveling some earth onto the casket. In our final act of love, we show our care for the individual until the last possible moment. Placing the earth over the casket is a symbol of this. This task is usually performed by the closest relatives and friends, as well as other community leaders. The earth-filling process expresses the finality of death while giving us an opportunity to lovingly return our loved

ones to the earth. For some, this duty can be extraordinarily difficult, and Reform tradition encourages mourners to choose if this is a custom they wish to observe.

Since the act of shoveling the earth on the casket is a *mitzvah*, we do not hand the shovel to fellow mourners. Rather, we place it back into the dirt so that they can fulfill the *mitzvah* on their own accord, not have it thrust upon them. Additionally, recognizing that this is a hard *mitzvah* to fulfill, and one we fulfill reluctantly, the dirt is lifted using the back of the shovel.

THE PERIOD OF SHIVA AND MOURNING

In the event that you have a death in the family, Washington Hebrew Congregation will provide for you a copy of Judaism and Bereavement: A Guide to Mourning. This section therefore, will focus on the role of the person making the condolence call, rather than the mourner.

A Meal of Comfort: A meal of comfort is customarily served to the mourners upon their return home from the cemetery and commencing the period of *shiva*. The purpose of this meal is not to engage in a social celebration or to offer elaborate food. The purpose is to underscore to the grieving family the need to begin the slow and difficult process of restoring, step by step, a semblance of normalcy to their lives. Life goes on, and eating is necessary to live.

Condolence Calls: The tradition of honoring the deceased and more importantly, expressing our sympathy, concern and compassion for the mourners is an ancient Jewish practice. Judaism offers many customs and practices that may be helpful in this regard.

Since the period of most intense and traumatic mourning tends to be from the time of death until the actual funeral takes place, Jewish tradition wisely counsels that only the immediate family visits the bereaved during this period. The immediate family is often occupied with arrangements or details relating to the

service as well as collecting their own thoughts and dealing with the profound impact of the death of a loved one.

Following the funeral and during the period of *shiva* that follows, condolence calls are most appropriate and usually serve as a source of great comfort and spiritual solace for the bereaved.

The purpose of these visits, however, should not be viewed as distracting the attention of the mourners from their intense grief. Those who visit should use the time appropriately to speak of the deceased and to reflect on the special memories from which all who were closest to the person may draw strength and support.

There can be theological and/or psychological issues which are very difficult for the mourners during this initial time of grief. In general, most people who have come to pay their condolences will find it best to leave these more complex, yet genuine concerns for pastoral counseling, rabbinical counseling, or consultations with mental health professionals. Visitors should take their cues from the mourners and talk or listen as needed.

KADDISH, YAHRZEIT AND UNVEILING

Saying *Kaddish*: *Kaddish* is traditionally recited daily by the primary mourners — parents, siblings, spouse and children — for one month, as well, some have the tradition to say *Kaddish* daily for the first year. In the Reform movement, close family and loved ones recite the prayer for 30 days following death on Shabbat or at any other time one is so moved. After the first year, which concludes the formal period of mourning, *Kaddish* is said during *Yizkor* services on the afternoon of Yom Kippur and during the pilgrimage festivals of Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot. The *Kaddish*, an Aramaic prayer, affirms life and God's blessing of the precious gift of life. There is no mention of death in this prayer.

Observing *Yahrzeit*: It is a *mitzvah* to observe the anniversary of the date of death. Traditional Jews usually observe the date on the Hebrew calendar. At Washington Hebrew Congregation, we mark this date on the English calendar and observe the *yahrzeit* on the closest upcoming Shabbat. At Washington Hebrew Congregation, memorial plaques may be purchased to be permanently displayed in Archives Hall. During the week in which *yahrzeit* is observed, the plaque will be displayed outside Kaufmann Sanctuary.

Tombstone and the Unveiling: The tradition of the unveiling of the tombstone is new to Jewish funeral practice. It was instituted in America in the last 50 years for the purpose of formally concluding the year of mourning. Passages from psalms, other appropriate readings, and *Kaddish* are customarily recited. No eulogy is offered. Indeed, the unveiling is not an occasion for a second funeral. It is rather an occasion to dedicate the tombstone. Washington Hebrew Congregation will arrange for one of our rabbis or cantors to join you, or family members may conduct this service themselves. We can provide a [Service of Unveiling](#) which we have prepared that will guide you through conducting your own service if you wish to do so without the assistance of a rabbi or cantor.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Jewish customs of death and mourning developed over the centuries in response to the needs of Jewish mourners to pay homage and respect to their loved ones, as well as to find appropriate ways to cope with their loss. We encourage all our members to be familiar with our traditional practices before they are confronted with a loss. Reform Judaism encourages individuals to choose those customs which have meaning. For further study, we recommend the following books:

- Diamont, Anita. Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead & Mourn as a Jew. Schocken Books, New York, 1998.
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- Kubler-Ross, Elizabeth. On Death and Dying. Touchstone, New York, 1997.
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- Syme, Daniel B. The Jewish Home: A Guide for Jewish Living. URJ Press, New York, 2004.
- Syme, Daniel B. and Howard Bogot. My Body Is Something Special. URJ Press, New York, 1998.