

**DEATH
AND
MOURNING**

The death of a loved one is always a difficult experience. As our prayer book says:
"When cherished ties are broken, and the chain of love is shattered, only trust and the strength of faith can lighten the heaviness of the heart. At times, the pain of separation seems more than we can bear; but love and understanding can help us pass through the darkness toward the light."

Jewish customs and rituals of mourning have developed to help the bereaved deal with their loss and honor their loved one. As Reform Jews, we do not hold that there is a single, prescribed way to mourn. Rather, we believe that each **mourner***, after learning of the customs and traditions of Judaism, should observe those practices in which he or she finds meaning and purpose. This guide is designed to assist Congregation Beth Chaverim members and their families in preparing for and facing a time of loss. It approaches funeral and bereavement practices from the perspective of Reform Judaism and our community. It also identifies many ways our Rabbi and fellow congregants can be of assistance during a difficult time.

We hope that this Guide will help to provide information and support for our members in their time of need. Please contact the rabbi or the Temple administrator for further guidance related to:

Local funeral homes

Burial plot information

Memorial arrangements

Support and comfort for the mourning family

*As you review this guide, words or phrases in bold print are defined in the glossary at the end.

AT THE APPROACH OF DEATH

Whether in a home, hospital, or care center setting, a person who is dying should be afforded the greatest respect. A person whose death is imminent is called a **goses**. As death comes closer, the person may be encouraged by family members or the rabbi to say **Vidu'i** and the **Shema**. If the person is unable to recite them, then someone may say these prayers on his or her behalf. It is a **mitzvah** upon witnessing or hearing of the death of a loved one to recite the following blessing, called **Tzidduk Hadin**:

Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha'olam dayan ha'emet.
Blessed is Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe,
the Righteous Judge.

PREPARING FOR THE FUNERAL

Jewish tradition discourages the making of specific funeral arrangements before a person's death. Nonetheless, more general preparations, such as the purchase of burial plots, should be done before the time of need. The **mitzvah** to bury the dead is incumbent first of all upon the heirs of the deceased. A spouse buries the deceased spouse. In the event that no heirs are available to provide for burial, that responsibility falls upon the community as a whole.

Burial is the recommended and usual practice in Jewish tradition. Reform Judaism encourages burial, but allows for cremation or entombment in mausoleums. After cremation, ashes are often buried in a Jewish cemetery or on the immediate family's private property. It is preferable to use a simple wooden coffin usually pine. Coffins made of other materials are acceptable, but simplicity of design and construction is the rule, to emphasize equality in death.

Jewish tradition strongly emphasizes the need for speedy burial (or cremation), regarding the delay of burial as an act of disrespect to the dead.

However, delays are permitted in order to make adequate preparations for the funeral and to allow the **mourners** to gather. Funerals do not take place on Shabbat or major holidays, since on these days Jews traditionally abstain from the kinds of labor required as part of the burial process.

Temple Emanu-El in Weldon North Carolina had reserved a number of burial plots in the Jewish section of a cemetery in Roanoke Rapids, NC. We at Congregation Beth Chaverim have inherited these plots and they are available for congregants. If you are interested in learning more about these, please contact the office administrator.

PREPARATION OF THE BODY

Reform Jews observe a variety of customs concerning treatment of the body; it is best to consult with the rabbi, who can help describe the range of options. Following careful cleansing and washing, the body is wrapped for burial in white linen **shrouds**. These preparations will most often be made by the funeral director, and sometimes by members of the **Chevre Kaddisha**. If these preparations are desired, arrangements can be made through the Rabbi or the funeral home. Burial may take place wearing ordinary clothing or traditional linen **shrouds**. The deceased may be dressed in a **tallit** as well, if desired. Jewish tradition frowns upon embalming, both as a foreign custom and as an unnecessary delay in the body's decomposition.

Reform Judaism approves the donation of the organs of one's body for the purpose of transplantation. An individual may also donate his or her entire body to science, provided that the institution which is to receive the body is known to treat the body with respect and that, when the study is completed, the remains are buried or cremated.

Autopsies are permitted in Reform Judaism, as long as they are performed for the purpose of increasing medical knowledge or in compliance with legal obligations. If the deceased has left instructions against autopsy, however, these instructions should be honored as a general rule.

This position presumes that the remains will be treated with the respect due to the human body. The burial should be arranged as soon as possible following the procedure.

THE FUNERAL CEREMONY

The funeral ceremony should be governed by simplicity and dignity. Jewish tradition is opposed to the practice of public viewing of the deceased in an open coffin. The family may, if they wish, view the body privately, but the coffin must be closed before the funeral service begins. Flowers are not utilized as decorations at most Jewish funerals. While Reform practice does not forbid flowers, the rules of simplicity and dignity govern their use. Families are encouraged to request that gifts to charity be made in lieu of flowers. The **mourners** will have the option of symbolically rending their garments at the beginning of the funeral service in a ceremony called **keri'ah**. In most cases a black ribbon is provided for rending by the funeral home.

The funeral may take place at the Temple, at a funeral home, or at the graveside. The service itself consists of a number of traditional psalms and prayers which you can discuss with the rabbi. The central and best known prayer is the **Kaddish**. Though the **Kaddish** is recited in memory of the departed, it is significant that it contains no reference to death. Rather, the **Kaddish** praises and glorifies God and prays for life and peace. Reform Jewish practice encourages both men and women to recite the prayer. Traditionally, if one is mourning a parent, he or she recites **Kaddish** for an entire year. The deceased's name will be read during the Shabbat service following the death, and can be mentioned at the first Yom Kippur memorial service following the burial.

It is a strong tradition that the funeral includes a eulogy of the deceased, which may be written and delivered by the rabbi and/or a family member or close friend.

Members of the family or close friends are generally asked to serve as pallbearers. Usually, the **mourners** themselves do not serve as pallbearers. Both men and women may participate in this honor. It is not uncommon for grandchildren (when old enough) to perform this honored task.

At the completion of the interment ceremony at the cemetery, **mourners** often symbolically help bury the deceased by placing a spade full of earth on the grave. Other attendees may follow **mourners** and participate in this custom. Some follow the customs that all those present help to fill the grave or completely cover the coffin, but most Reform Jews entrust this task to the funeral director after the **mourners** and others have departed.

There are a number of Jewish customs when one returns from a burial to a house of mourning. Generally, family or close friends of the **mourners** should make arrangements in advance of the funeral, to set up the home for receiving visitors and for serving a light meal. Sometimes **mourners** have some water and towels outside their front door, to allow for a symbolic transition from the grave site to the home through the washing of the hands.

THE CUSTOMS OF MOURNING

The period of mourning begins with the burial of the deceased. Following the funeral, visitors are encouraged to pay their respects at the home of the **mourners**.

Although it is a **mitzvah** to console the bereaved and to help them in any way we can, the hours or days before burial are not considered a proper time to make condolence calls. The custom of pre-funeral visitation in the chapel is contrary to Jewish tradition and is to be discouraged.

Young children should be permitted but not forced to participate in some aspects of the rituals of grief. They should be allowed to attend the funeral if they wish. The presence of children at a funeral is an important symbol of continuing life.

The funeral provides children with an opportunity to have their questions answered and helps them accept the reality of death.

Mourners customarily light a seven-day memorial candle upon returning from the cemetery. It is usually provided by the funeral home. This candle is a reminder of the light the deceased brought to the **mourners**. The candle should be placed in a conspicuous location and is kept burning throughout the week. There is no blessing that is recited over this candle lighting.

The first meal following the return from the cemetery customarily includes hard-boiled eggs and bread, symbols of life and hope. This first meal should be prepared by friends and/or members of the congregation. See attached suggested menu for “Meal of Consolation” at the end of the booklet.

After the funeral, while observing **shivah**, **mourners** are encouraged to remain at home, their normal routines suspended, for seven days, except for attending Sabbath services at the synagogue. The first 3 days are considered the most critical in Reform tradition. The wearing of black is not mandatory.

Mourners may prepare or cook meals for their own use, but serving visitors is discouraged.

It is considered a great **mitzvah** of loving kindness and compassion to pay a home visit to the **mourners** during the **shiva** period. Traditionally, no greetings are exchanged and visitors wait for the **mourners** to initiate conversation. Sometimes, visitors will recite the traditional words of consolation: Ha-makom yenachem et'chem b'toch she'ar avelei Tzion vi'Yerushlayim, which translates as *"May God comfort you together with the other **mourners** of Zion and Jerusalem."*

Once engaged in conversation by the **mourner**, it is appropriate for visitors to talk about the deceased, sharing stories of his or her life.

Shivah is not meant to distract the **mourners** from their loss, but rather to let them experience their grief together with friends and family.

Reform Jews may choose to follow the practices of **shivah** for fewer than seven days. Whatever the choice, the period of **shivah** should not exceed seven days, as we are encouraged to embrace life, despite our mourning. Covering mirrors is a long-standing tradition that **mourners** may want to discuss with the rabbi. Rarely, **mourners** will have low stools or boxes available as a way of not being too comfortable during **shivah**. Reform Judaism encourages us to learn about rituals and embrace those that bring us comfort and meaning.

Jewish tradition speaks of several milestones in the course of mourning: the seven days of **shivah**, thirty days of **sheloshim**, the full year of reciting **Kaddish**. Please ask the rabbi to describe these milestones more fully.

MEMORIAL PRACTICES

It is not customary to visit the cemetery in the month following the funeral. As the intent of this custom is to spare the bereaved the pain such a visit can cause, it should not be considered an inflexible rule.

Thereafter, visitation is unrestricted, but it is not customary to visit on Shabbat or Jewish holidays. The month prior to the High Holy days is a common time for such visits. The tradition of placing a small stone on the grave marker hearkens back to the time when it was a family responsibility to maintain loved ones' graves. Today, it testifies that the grave has been visited by those who remember the person buried there.

The tombstone should generally be placed before the first **yahrzeit** anniversary of death. Though tombstone dedications, or unveilings, are not required by Jewish tradition, many families do gather together at the cemetery for a brief service of

dedication for the grave marker. It is very common for families to officiate at their own unveiling services. The rabbi will be happy to speak with you and supply a simple self-explanatory service. If the rabbi's participation is desired, please consult with him or her about a date and time.

Many **mourners** choose to honor a deceased through the **mitzvah** of **tzedakah**. Friends of **mourners** may also express sympathy or respect by making a memorial contribution. Some families include a request for contributions to a charity that had special meaning for the deceased, in the obituary notice and/or funeral program.

For those who wish to make a charitable donation to the Temple in memory of a loved one, Memorial Plaques are available for purchase at Congregation Beth Chaverim. These Memorial Plaques are installed on the walls of our Sanctuary. By having the name of a loved one on the Memorial Board, you are ensured that **Kaddish** will be recited 'forever' on the **yahrzeit** date. Other opportunities for remembering a loved one are available through a variety of congregational funds. Congregants interested in making substantial contributions should contact the Temple office for guidance.

GLOSSARY

Aninut: (ah-nee-noot) the first stage of mourning, the time between death and the burial.

Avelut: (ah-vay-loot) is the general Hebrew term for mourning.

Chevre Kaddisha: (chev-rah k'd-deesha) Jewish tradition includes many customs for preparing the body for burial. The **Chevre Kaddisha** (Sacred Fellowship) is a widespread Jewish community institution that provides for this preparation, which might include washing and dressing the body. If you wish the services of the **Chevre**

Kaddisha the Rabbi and the funeral home can help you contact them. Any reputable

funeral home should accommodate these customs. Our Rabbi will help you decide on an appropriate level of observance for your family.

Goses: (go-ses) is someone who is expected to die within 72 hours.

Kaddish: (ka-dish) **Mourners** recite the **Kaddish**, the **Mourners** prayer, for the first time at the cemetery after the burial. It is recited on each anniversary of the death (**Yahrzeit**) and at memorial services (Yizkor).

Keri'ah: (kree-ah) tearing of a garment over the heart. The rending of the garment is traditionally performed in a standing position. Most common today is for a tear to be made in a black ribbon attached by pin to one's outer clothing. The ceremony is performed immediately before the funeral service begins.

Kosher: prepared according to religious requirements.

Mitzvah: (mitz-vah) A good deed, commandment.

Mourner: The "**mourner**" is anyone who is obligated under Jewish law to practice the rituals of mourning (**avelut**): that is, the parent, child, sibling, or spouse of the deceased.

Onenet: (o-nen-et) the relative of the deceased is called onen or **onenet**. The **onenet**'s sole preoccupation is to bury his or her dead; therefore, he or she is exempt from all positive religious obligations that might occur during that time. On Shabbat, when we do not bury the dead, the **onenet** observes the normal obligations of a religious Jew.

Sheloshim (shlo-SHEEM): literally 30, it is the 30 day mourning period following the burial of a loved one. While **mourners** are encouraged after the end of Shiva to begin turning back to daily life, Judaism recognizes that the process should be gradual.

Traditionally, **mourners** resume their business and daily routine but avoid social events and entertainment during the remainder of **Sheloshim**. Attending services is encouraged and is not considered to be a social event. Certain social events, such as the wedding or bar/bat **mitzvah** of a close family member, might lead a **mourner** to make an exception to the observance. For Reform Jews, the timeline is considered flexible, and **mourners** should make the personal decision based on their own beliefs and comfort levels.

Shema: (she-ma) "Hear O Israel" prayer.

Shivah:(shi-va) **Shivah** is the period of mourning beginning immediately after the burial. It literally means "seven," referring to the traditional period of seven days.

Shomer: (show-mer) watch person for the deceased before the burial. In Orthodox Jewish practice, the body is not left alone until burial.

Shroud: traditional linen material in which the body is wrapped for burial.

Tallit: (tall-leet) prayer shawl

Tzedakah: (tah-zed-kah) making a charitable contribution.

Tzidduk Hadin: (tzee-duke ha-deen)The blessing said at the bedside following a death is called **Tzidduk Hadin**, "the justification of the decree," a statement of faith by which we affirm the ultimate goodness of God and God's world even in the face of grievous loss.

Vidu'i:(vid-ou-ee) It is a **mitzvah** for the critically ill person to recite a special prayer, traditionally known as the Confession (Vidui), in contemplation of death. It is also a **mitzvah** for an individual (not necessarily a rabbi) to help the dying person to say this prayer or recite it on his or her behalf.

Yahrzeit: (Yar-zite) annual memorial of death. It is a widespread custom to keep a memorial lamp burning from sunset to sunset on this anniversary. Those observing the **yahrzeit** are expected to recite **kaddish** at the services on this day. The occasion is marked by the giving of charity. **Yahrzeit** is not an occasion for renewed mourning, but rather a day consecrated to the memory of the deceased. The family should agree among its members to observe either the Hebrew or the secular date of death. If the Congregation Beth Chaverim office is informed of the **yahrzeit** date, the name will be included at **Kaddish** during Friday evening services on the week following the **yahrzeit** date. If you need to adjust the week on which a **yahrzeit** will be read, please notify the Temple office.

SUGGESTED MENU FOR A MEAL OF CONSOLATION

Dairy menu planned for 25 to 30 people.

1 dozen peeled hard-boiled eggs

1 lb egg salad

1 lb tuna salad

2 dozen sliced bagels

1 loaf sliced bread (rye, pumpernickel, challah, etc.)

1 platter of lettuce leaves, tomato slices, onion slices

1 platter or bowl of fresh fruit

1 cake (coffee or crumb)

1 platter of assorted cookies

Drinks: decaf coffee, iced tea, regular and diet sodas

1 container of coffee creamer

Sugar and sugar substitute

1 bag of ice cubes

Additional foods can be brought to the home by friends and neighbors. Suggested items might be a cheese platter, cakes, fruit, or other dairy foods (lox, herring, etc.) or a kugel.

Paper plates, plastic utensils, hot and cold cups and napkins should be available. If friends or congregation members are setting up the meal, the family might set out serving platters, a tablecloth, and a large coffee pot (if available.)

Any questions about appropriate foods should be directed to the rabbi or Ritual Committee.

Compiled by Beth Chaverim Ritual Committee

Ruth Cardiff—Chair 2008

With a great deal of help from –

Rabbi Israel Zoberman, founding Rabbi

With a special thanks to Congregation Shir Shalom, Gainesville, Florida
whose guide acted as our inspiration.