

Congregation Ahavath Sholom Guide for Jewish Burial and Mourning

Edited by Rabbi Andrew Bloom

The first steps to take when a loved one dies are to call your Rabbi and to call a funeral home. Contacting your family Rabbi before finalizing any burial plans is very important. Aside from aiding you with adhering to Conservative Jewish law, your Rabbi has experience with bereaved families and can discuss with you final wishes of the departed, and other special situations that you may have to consider in planning a funeral, burial, and mourning observance. Your Rabbi's input will make the decisions you need to face easier and the entire process far less daunting.

*The passing of a loved one can be a very stressful and traumatic time. You should not try to go through this alone. It is our responsibility as part of the Jewish community to help you through this time in your life. **So, contact Congregation Ahavath Sholom** as soon as you can. We consider this to be a Rabbinic Emergency. Do not hesitate to call, be it late at night, on the Sabbath, or during a Jewish holiday. **There will always be someone for you to contact in case of death.***

*During hours when the synagogue office is open, call Congregation Ahavath Sholom main number, 817-731-4721 and you will be put through to **Rabbi Andrew Bloom**. When the office is closed call Congregation Ahavath Sholom main number, listen to the voice prompts, and dial the extension 105 for Rabbi Bloom **There will be a message on how to contact the Rabbi**, or whomever is covering for the Rabbi in his absence. **Rabbi Bloom's cell phone number is 732/598-2795 and the cell number for Martis Herman, Current Chair of the Cemetery Committee, is 817/307-2591.***

Congregation Ahavath Sholom has its own cemetery with burial plots available. The Cemetery is located on North University in Fort Worth, and can be reached by contacting the main office.

Once your burial plans are finalized, you may request that the funeral and shiva information be sent to synagogue members via our e-mail contact list, and if the deceased is a congregant, placed on our shiva information phone message system. Congregation Ahavath Sholom may also have other member services available to aid you through this time of sorrow, depending on your particular needs or circumstances.

Congregation Ahavath Sholom has both a men's and women's Chevra Kadisha, Jewish burial society, which performs tahara, the ritual purification (washing) of a body prior to burial.

No matter what the status of the deceased was or how privileged the life led, all bodies are wrapped in the same white shroud (tachrichim) prior to being placed in a coffin.

Men are traditionally buried with their tallit (prayer shawl).

Immediate burial is a hallmark of Judaism. It is tradition for the burial to take place as soon as possible. Only under certain circumstances may the burial be delayed. Please consult with your Rabbi as to the appropriate time for your loved ones funeral and burial.

The deceased should not be left alone until the burial is completed. A **Shomer** (guard or watchman) may be designated (or hired) to stay with the departed when no one else is present.

Jewish people do not have a wake (where the body is displayed) or allow a body to "lie in state" because it is Judaism's belief that the body should be brought to its resting place as soon as possible. Also, it is not customary to bring flowers to a funeral because the funeral is to be as simple as possible.

Embalming is forbidden by Jewish law. Removing blood and substituting chemical preservatives in the body is considered desecration of the deceased.

Autopsies are not allowed because it is considered defilement of the departed. A Rabbi must be consulted if an autopsy has to be done; however, organ donation (for an organ recipient) is now allowed and considered a mitzvah.

Cremation is not condoned in Jewish law because the body was given to us as a gift from God who expects us to take care of ourselves and return to God in the best condition possible.

Wooden caskets are used in Jewish burial because it is our belief that we do not preserve the body, for as the body decays, the soul ascends to heaven. This is reflected within Jewish law as a reference for a simple, wooden Aron (casket or coffin). It is also believed that death is the great equalizer. No matter what the status of the deceased was or how privileged the life led, we all come to the same end and should be buried in the same simple manner.

Traditionally, caskets are made of plain pine boards and use wooden pegs rather than nails or screws as fasteners. The interior is unlined, and some have four holes in the bottom that allow the body to come into contact with the earth.

Cutting (kria) is conducted at the funeral or at the graveside. A Rabbi, Cantor or officiant tears the blouse, shirt, or jacket (or a symbolic black ribbon) of the mourners as a sign of mourning. The Rabbi will indicate to each family member the length of time that the ribbon should be worn.

For a mother or father, left side of the garment is ripped. For all other family members the right side of the garment is torn.

Mourners and mourning: Naturally, everyone who knew the departed can mourn; however, Judaism specifies immediate family members who are expected to observe the mourning period. They are the mother and father, son and daughter, brother (half-brother) and sister (half-sister), and husband and wife.

Jewish cemeteries are not denominational; Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and non-practicing Jews can be buried in the same cemetery. As such, it is your duty, in consultation with the Rabbi, to make sure Conservative laws are adhered to in the burial process.

Filling in the grave is customary at Jewish burials. As a final show of respect for the departed, family members and friends may help fill in the grave. There are many variations of this; however, the most symbolic is tossing three shovels of earth on the coffin. Some customs insist the coffin should be covered by earth prior to leaving the gravesite. Others believe that the entire grave should be filled in. Contact the Rabbi for guidance.

Everyone leaving the cemetery after a burial should ceremoniously wash hands three times before entering a private home to symbolically separate death from life. It is customary that there be a container or cup of water and towels at the front door of the shiva house so the mourners returning from the burial can wash their hands without disturbing those inside.

Kaddish (Mourning Kaddish) is an important and central blessing in every Jewish prayer service. Several variations of the Kaddish are used as functional separators between various sections of the prayer service.

The Kaddish is not a prayer about death or mourning. It is an affirmation of life and faith of God. It reaffirms the mourner's relationship with God and God's will on earth.

The term "Kaddish" is often used to refer specifically to "The Mourners' Kaddish" said as part of the mourning ritual in Judaism. It shows both remembrance for those that have passed on, and one's continued devotion to God. Mourners "say Kaddish" for the first time at the burial service.

Kaddish is said for eleven (Jewish calendar) months for the loss of a parent and for 30 days (Shloshim) for the loss of any other family member.

Both sons and daughters may say kaddish for a parent. Jews who have a non-Jewish parent according to the Law Committee of the Conservative Movement may say Kaddish for that parent and follow the mourning rituals of Shiva and Shloshim.

If there is no one who can say Kaddish for the departed for the full mourning period, it is appropriate to designate someone else to say Kaddish. It is considered a privilege for the departed's soul to have someone say Kaddish.

Shiva, the week of mourning, begins with the burial. During the week of shiva, family members and friends come to comfort the mourners.

Visiting mourners is an essential part of shiva. They should console and comfort mourners, and be respectful of and attentive to their needs. This includes making sure food or meals are brought to the shiva home, and if necessary that chores are done, so the mourners may mourn for the departed without interruption.

Mourners may not work during shiva unless it is absolutely necessary. The term "work" extends beyond professional or business activities to yard work, housework and even the preparation of meals.

It is traditional that for the first meal after the funeral, the mourners eat a hard-boiled egg, or something else round, to indicate that life is like an orb or a circle, with no beginning or end, just an endless cycle of life.

It is customary that there be a minyan in the shiva house so that the mourners may say Kaddish in their home. *(If requested, Congregation Ahavath Sholom can provide prayer books and leaders for evening prayer services.)* These leaders may either be synagogue clergy or volunteers.

Mourners sit on low stools as a symbol of being "brought low with grief" and should not stand up to greet visitors who have come to the shiva house. Also, it is customary to leave the front door of the shiva house unlocked so that mourners may mourn for the departed without being interrupted.

Nowhere is it prescribed that shiva stools should be uncomfortable.

All mirrors in the house where the mourners sit shiva are covered, as mourners are not to be concerned with their outward appearance. Other customs that may be followed are the prohibition against wearing leather shoes, using make-up or perfume, shaving, haircuts, marital relations, entertainment, music, and dancing.

Shiva is interrupted by the Sabbath, whereupon the mourners may dress as usual, go to synagogue and say Kaddish there.

Shiva ends on noon of the seventh day; however, the arrival of a Jewish holiday annuls the remainder of shiva. Please contact the Rabbi for guidance if a death occurs on or near a Jewish holiday. After sitting shiva it is customary for mourners to take a walk around the block as a symbol of their return to their normal world.

Shloshim is the 30 days of mourning which includes the shiva period. After which, mourners return to their normal routines; however they continue to say Kaddish at prayer services. While one is not supposed to attend joyous functions there is corollary that you do not postpone a simcha (joyous event, specifically a wedding or bar/bat mitzvah) because you are in mourning. Consult the Rabbi about how to address the issues of music and dancing.

Visiting the cemetery: customs vary. In Israel mourners wait until after shiva to visit the cemetery for the first time, while outside Israel, mourners generally wait for the Shloshim (thirty days) or eleven months mourning period to end before visiting the cemetery.

It is the custom to put a pebble or stone on the tombstone. This is a symbol that someone has visited the gravesite to pay respect to the departed.

Customs also vary about the tombstone unveiling ceremony. In Israel, many people do it after Shloshim. Outside of Israel it is generally done during the 11th month after the burial. Rabbi would be the best person to contact about determining the appropriate time for a tombstone unveiling.

The usual practice is to place both the English and Hebrew names of the departed on the tombstone, along with his or her parent's names. Some people may also list the birth date and the date that the person died.

The El Maleh Rachamim (God, Full of Compassion) prayer is recited for the first time at the gravesite and then every year at Yizkor services. This prayer asks God to grant the departed eternal rest.

Yahrzeit (Anniversary of Passing) is observed on the day the person passed away according to the Jewish calendar. A Yahrzeit candle (which lasts 24 hours) is lit in the home and the Mourners' Kaddish is recited at a local prayer service.

Congregation Ahavath Sholom can mail you a reminder of Yahrzeits. This is very important since the Yahrzeit date changes every year because the Yahrzeit is based on the Jewish calendar. You can also memorialize the memory of a loved one by purchasing a brass memorial plaque to be mounted on our Yahrzeit wall. Contact Congregation Ahavath Sholom's office for details.

Yizkor (remember) is a prayer service in memory of the departed. This service is part of prayer services on Yom Kippur, Shemini Atzeretz, the last days of Passover and Shavuot.

In some communities there is a custom that discourages attending Yizkor services during the first year of mourning. It is our practice at Congregation Ahavath Sholom for mourners to attend Yizkor services during their first year of mourning.

Additional information that may be of interest or comfort to you are:

Books:

[Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead, and Mourn as a Jew](#) by Anita Diamant

[Mourning & Mitzvah: A Guide Journal for Walking the Mourner's Path Through Grief to Healing](#) by Anne Brener

[A Time to Mourn, a Time to Comfort: A Guide to Jewish Bereavement \(The Art of Jewish Living\)](#) by Ron Wolfson

[The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning](#) (revised and expanded edition) by Maurice Lamm

Websites:

www.myjewishlearning.com

www.jewish-funerals.org