

CUSTOMS OF MOURNING

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
God maketh me to lie down in green pastures.
God leadeth me beside the still waters. God restoreth my soul.
God guideth me in straight paths for His name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.
Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.
Thou hast anointed my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.
And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

--Psalm 23

The primary principle underlying every Jewish law, ritual, and custom having to do with death and mourning is kavod, a word which means honor and respect. The Jewish approach to bereavement is also based on respect for the powerful emotions of loss. May you find comfort in our traditions and in your loved ones at this very difficult time.

THE MOMENT BEFORE DEATH

In addition to a "confession," called the "vidui" in Hebrew, the person is encouraged to recite the Shema, a symbol that they are dying as a "Jew."

Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad

Hear O Israel Adonai is our God, Adonai is One.

If the person is too sick to say the Shema himself, others may recite it for him/her. This can be done on a nightly basis if the situation is uncertain.

IMMEDIATELY AFTER DEATH

The process immediately following the death of a loved one is filled with gestures of respect for both the body and for life itself. Many of these customs are not followed today; nevertheless, individuals may find any or all of these a meaningful part of mourning.

1. Rending of the garment. Immediately upon receiving the news of the death, the mourner may tear a garment or ribbon. These days most Jews wait until just before the funeral to observe this custom, and often they do it by attaching a black ribbon to their lapel over their heart and then cutting it. By waiting until the funeral, all the immediate mourners can be gathered together united through this emotionally difficult expression of common bereavement. This tear represents the torn heart of the mourner, a tear which, sadly, can never be repaired. At the time of the death, the following prayer is recited, acknowledging the difficulties of living in a world we do not completely understand.

Baruch ata Adonai Eloheinu melech ha'olom, dayan ha'emet.

Praised are you Adonai our God, ruler of the universe, judge of truth.

2. Feet, Candles, Eyes and Windows. The position of the body should be so oriented that the feet face the doorway, and the eyes should be shut. These are simply signs of respect. A candle should be placed at the head, symbolizing that life is like a finite flame, none of us immortal. A window is opened, symbolizing the soul's release. Many Jews choose not to follow these customs today, but all can imbue the recently taken life with respect and meaning.

3. Guarding and Washing the Body. Traditionally, for the purpose of honoring the body, a person traditionally stays with the body from the moment of death until interment. This process is called *Shemira*, which means guarding. Often the

person with the body, called the *Shomer*, recites Psalms while doing so. Bodies also go through a washing and purification process called *Tahara*. This is done by a Jewish burial society, called the *Chevra Kadisha*, familiar with the process and its laws.

THE FUNERAL

Jewish funerals take place as soon as possible following death, although they may be postponed until relatives can arrive as a way to honor the dead. Burials are not permitted on Shabbat or Jewish holidays. The short funeral service includes some Psalms, the *El Malei Rachamim* (a prayer which focuses on God's compassion for the deceased's soul), and the eulogy, called the *Hesped*. Multiple speeches and long services are not part of a traditional Jewish funeral.

BURIAL

In general, Judaism emphasizes simplicity and dignity in the burial process. A simple, unadorned wooden casket is generally used (with no metal whatsoever), and people are usually buried in a *Tallit* or plain white shroud. All Jewish funerals are closed casket, again, emphasizing respect for the body. Similarly, cremation is frowned upon by Jewish law, both for reasons of respect for the body and because of certain beliefs in the afterlife.

Close relatives or friends are usually chosen as pallbearers. The pallbearers often stop seven times on the way to the grave, thus linking the deceased with the original seven days of creation and the idea that "from dust we came and to dust we shall return." At the graveside, the mourners shovel dirt on the gravesite, so they can participate in the commandment of burying their loved ones as well as acknowledging the end of the body as we know it. The backside of the shovel is generally used first to show how painful it is to fulfill this commandment. However, it is not just symbolic. *Kaddish* is not recited until the casket is completely covered. The Mourner's *Kaddish* is a prayer that emphasizes God's nearness and greatness even in this difficult time.

The funeral service ends with everyone but the immediate family forming two rows and reciting the words: "may God console you with all who mourn in Zion and Jerusalem" as the family walks through the rows.

SHIVA

The first seven days of mourning are called the *Shiva*, and certain customs are generally observed. They begin with the washing of the hands at the door, acknowledging the sad duty just completed at the grave. A seven day candle, usually provided by the funeral home, is lit. Then, a meal is shared, hopefully prepared by friends, upon whom this mitzvah is incumbent. Often eggs and other round foods, such as lentils, are served as a symbol of the continuing cycle of life. Mirrors are often covered, deemphasizing personal vanity at a time when we are remembering the importance of life itself. People often sit on stools or on the ground, symbolizing connection with the recently deceased. Often friends continue to provide meals for the week as well as a nightly service at which the Mourner's *Kaddish* can be said.

The purpose of *Shiva* is not to make mourners feel better or to cheer them up, but for people to be with the mourners in their time of need. Feelings of anger, loss, and sorrow are more than acceptable. The first three days are considered the most intense, and many observe the customs only for this period. When the *shiva* is up, it is customary to take a walk around the block, symbolizing that, though still grieving, the mourner is ready to return to everyday life.

Adonai oz l'amo yiten, Adonai yivareich et amo vashalom.

May God grant you strength and inner peace in this very difficult time.