

## Jewish Funeral Customs: Saying Goodbye to a Loved One

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Just as there is a way to live as a Jew, there is also a "way to die and be buried as a Jew," writes Blu Greenberg in her book, How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household (Fireside, 1983). This classic guide to Jewish living outlines traditional death rituals and practical issues, although many of these practices have been adapted somewhat by Reform Jews. The first thing to do after a death in the family, if you belong to a synagogue and the family member lives near you, is to contact your rabbi or another synagogue leader. Usually, the synagogue will take over many of the arrangements. However, when your family member lives far away and is not a member of a congregation, or when you are not a member, funeral homes can often suggest rabbis who will conduct a funeral. Jewish burials take place as quickly as possible, following a principle of honoring the dead (k'vod hamet). Only if immediate relatives cannot arrive in time from abroad, or there is not enough time for burial before Shabbat or a holiday, are burials postponed for a day. Anything less is considered a "humiliation of the dead," Greenberg explains.

If you don't already have funeral plots purchased, you or a representative will need to contact a cemetery to purchase a plot. You will also need to contact a funeral parlor to transfer the body and schedule the time of the funeral. Jewish law mandates a simple pine box, so although you may need to choose a plot, you don't need to concern yourself with elaborate decisions about coffins. Or with cremation or embalming, which are forbidden by Jewish law (halacha), Greenberg writes. However, many Reform rabbis will officiate at funerals involving cremation and embalming, according to Reform Rabbi Steven Chester.

Most well organized communities offer the services a sacred burial society (Chevra Kaddisha), which will prepare the body for burial. Men prepare men and women prepare women. They wash the body with warm water from head to foot and, although they may turn the body as necessary to clean it entirely, including all orifices, they never place it face down. The body is dressed in white burial shrouds (tachrichim), which are purposely kept simple to avoid distinguishing between rich or poor. Men are buried with their prayer shawls (tallits), which are rendered ineffective by cutting off one of the fringes. If, however, a person suffered an injury and blood soaked into his or her clothing, ritual washing is not completed. "...the blood of a person is considered as holy as his life and deserves proper burial," Greenberg writes. From the moment of death, the body is not left alone until after burial. This practice, called guarding/watching (shemira), is also based on the principle of honoring the dead. A family member, a Chevra Kaddisha member, or someone arranged by the funeral parlor passes the time by reciting psalms (Tehillim) as this person watches over the deceased.

Traditional Jewish funerals are very simple and usually relatively brief. Before they begin, the immediate relatives of the deceased – siblings, parents, children, spouse – tear their garments to symbolize their loss.

Sometimes the rabbi will tear their garments for them and recite a blessing, "Baruch atah Hashem Elokeinu melech haolam, dayan ha'emet," Blessed are you, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, the true Judge. A shorter version of the same blessing is recited by all who witness or hear about a death: "Baruch dayan emet," Blessed is the one true Judge.

Reform Jews often do not follow these practices. Instead, the rabbi tears black ribbons and hands family members a torn black ribbon to pin on their clothes to symbolize their loss. During the ceremony that follows, Psalms are recited, then a eulogy and the memorial prayer ("El Maleh Rachamim"). The casket is then carried or wheeled out of the room (accompanied by the 23rd Psalm in many Reform funerals) by the male members of a Chevra Kaddisha (or male family members in Reform funerals), regardless of the gender of the deceased, and the mourners follow behind the casket.

Those attending remain standing until the family mourners have left the room. In Reform funerals, people then often express their condolences to the family members of the deceased before the actual burial. In traditional funerals, people attending the funeral but not the burial may escort the dead, fulfilling the mitzvah of *leveyat hamet* by walking behind the hearse for a short distance. A Jew who is a Cohen, a descendant of the priestly class, will only attend the funeral and burial of his immediate family as he is otherwise forbidden to come near a corpse. You may see a close friend or relative who is a Cohen remain outside the funeral parlor or cemetery because of this law. At the cemetery, another custom in traditional funerals is to stop seven times – as the coffin is carried to the grave--to recite Psalm 91. Once the coffin is lowered into the grave, family and close friends cover the coffin with a few handfuls of dirt. The rabbi then repeats Psalm 91 and *El Maleh Rachamim*.

Following the burial, non-family members form two lines and, as the mourners pass by them, they recite the traditional condolence: "*Hamakom y'nachem etchem b'toch sh'ar avilai tziyon ee yerushalayim.*" May God comfort you among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. In traditional funerals, before leaving the cemetery mourners wash their hands as a symbolic cleansing.

After the burial, it is customary for the family to sit Shiva (in mourning). This was traditionally done for seven days, although many Reform and other Jews now sit Shiva for three days, and some for one day. Traditional Jews cover all mirrors during this time and sit on Shiva benches, however less observant Jews do not. It is customary for friends and family of the deceased as well as friends of the deceased's relatives to pay a Shiva call to the designated location where people are sitting Shiva, usually at the home of a close family member. Jews do not send flowers, but when paying a Shiva call it is appropriate to bring food, because the person mourning is not supposed to worry about such mundane matters. Being surrounded by family and close friends often helps mourners cope with the immediate loss. Often, family members find great solace from sharing memories of the deceased during the Shiva period.

Indeed, many mourners report that sitting Shiva was a time of family closeness, when small disagreements were overlooked in the face of the eternal.

### **Jewish Death Rituals According to Jewish Law**

The body of the deceased is washed thoroughly.

The deceased is buried in a simple pine coffin.

The deceased is buried wearing a simple white shroud (*tachrichim*).

The body is guarded or watched from the moment of death until after burial.

Just before a funeral begins, the immediate relatives of the deceased tear their garments or the rabbi does this to them or hands them torn black ribbons to pin on their clothes to symbolize their loss.

Upon hearing about a death, a Jew recites the words, "*Baruch dayan emet,*" Blessed be the one true Judge.

Ref.: <http://www.jewishfederations.org/page.aspx?ID=937>