

What May Happen at Jewish Ritual Events of Mourning



Autism & Grief Project

The rituals that take place following a death will vary depending on the deceased's wishes, family decisions, and religious and cultural traditions. The rituals below are part of the Jewish faith tradition. There are four major branches of Judaism: Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative and Orthodox. Not all of the branches practice all of these rituals in the same manner.

Preparing the Body for Burial

- If the family chooses, the deceased's body will not be left alone prior to burial. If desired, a Jewish burial society, called the *Hevrei Kaddisha*, can prepare the body for burial and say with it until burial. Embalming and cremation of the body are generally not practiced although some families (very few) have begun to choose cremation, often burying the "cremains" instead of the loved one's body.
- For those who choose, in a ritual called *tahara*, the body is washed and dressed in a shroud for burial. Depending on the branch of Judaism the family can opt for the deceased to also wear a prayer shawl or tallit. In the Orthodox tradition only men wear this garment. Special prayers are recited during the *tahara* ceremony.
- Some families will choose to forgo *tahara* and can also choose to bury their loved one in their own personal clothing.
- If circumstances allow, burial will occur as soon as possible.
- The casket and burial arrangements will be made by the family. The practice of choosing a simple casket made only of wood (no metal or plastic) is most common.
- An open casket and viewing of the body are very rarely practiced. It can in fact be deeply uncomfortable for many Jewish families.
- Upon burial, the body is returned to the earth, in a dedicated space.

Funeral Service

- Funerals are typically held in a funeral home or synagogue, but sometimes at a cemetery.
- At many Jewish funerals, for those who feel comfortable, it is customary to wear a head covering as a sign of respect. Sometimes this will be a kippah (traditional head covering most often worn by men, but women can wear it too), and for

others a scarf or shawl. At non-orthodox funerals, wearing a kippah or head covering is not a required practice. Mourner's and guests can choose what is most comfortable for them.

- A member of the clergy, often a rabbi or cantor will usually lead the service.
- More often in private, but on occasion publicly, the family can choose for clergy and other loved ones to cut or tear garments or affix a black ribbon to each immediate mourner's clothing. Cutting or tearing the garment or wearing the torn black ribbon is known as the *keriah*. It symbolizes the tear that takes place in a person's heart when they lose a member of their immediate family.
- If at all possible, please arrive before the start of the funeral service. For some it is considered disrespectful to enter the service in the middle of prayer.
- Often friends and loved ones will share *hespedim*, or memorial reflections.
- In some streams of Jewish practice, a *minyan* of at least 10 Jewish adults (in Orthodox practice only men) is required for certain memorial prayers to be recited and for burial to take place.
- A primary prayer during the funeral service is called the *Kaddish Yatom*, or Mourner's Kaddish. This prayer is recited in Aramaic and reminds the mourners' that God is always present.
- If the funeral is held in a funeral home or synagogue, following the service, mourners will travel to the cemetery for the *kevuah* or burial. Often it is only immediate family and the closest friends who will travel to the burial site.
- During the burial there will also be a brief service and in many instances mourners and other attendees will help fill the grave with earth, using the backside of the shovel to gently cover the casket.

Sitting Shiva (Mourning)

- Following the funeral, it is likely the family will return home or to another relative's home for the beginning of *shiva*.
- Shiva is a formal mourning period, traditionally seven days but sometimes for one to two days.
- Upon entering the house for the first time, many mourners will light a memorial candle. This candle will burn for the entire time shiva is observed.
- During shiva families receive visitors. In some traditions, it is customary not to greet the mourning family until they have first greeted you.
- Please do not send flowers—this is not Jewish practice.

- After attending the funeral, before you enter the house, there may be a pitcher of water outside that can be used to symbolically wash your hands (there is no soap). This is intended to “cleanse” those who have been to the cemetery before entering a place where people live. You do not have to participate in this ritual if you don’t feel comfortable.
- There may be food that the hosts have provided or that other people have brought; you can also bring food to the family.
- In some homes, mourners will sit on low stools or on the floor, cover mirrors, and, in the Orthodox tradition, refrain from wearing leather footwear or new clothing, cutting hair, shaving, or conducting business during this period.
- Each day of shiva many families hold a service to honor the deceased, again, depending on the tradition and the family.
- Condolence calls should be made by visitors during shiva at times specified by the family (do not come by unannounced). In most cases, condolence calls should not be made on Shabbat, the Jewish day of rest, which begins at sunset on Friday and lasts until nightfall on Saturday.
- While sitting shiva can be helpful for mourners, it is important to remember that they will continue to mourn after the shiva period has ended.

Ongoing Rituals

- In some streams of Judaism there are specific rituals both one week and one month after a death.
- Some will continue to recite the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, each day for eleven months. Others will recite this prayer every Shabbat. Some will choose to forgo this practice.
- At the eleven-month mark, families will often return to the cemetery to dedicate a memorial marker, in English this practice is called an unveiling. Sometimes the unveiling will take place at other times that are convenient for the family (or not at all).
- Each year on the anniversary of a person’s death according to the Jewish calendar many loved ones will mark their loss in a variety of ways. The date each year is called a person’s *yahrzeit* (anniversary of their death). Some people will give to charity or attend prayer services where the deceased’s name is read before the Mourner’s prayer. Some may also choose to light a memorial candle that will burn for 24 hours in their home.
- When visiting the grave, people will often bring a small rock to put on the gravestone.