

Jewish Death Care and Funeral Guidebook

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Jewish Death Care Guidebook Overview

As in the case of all religions and belief systems, death holds a great deal of significance in Judaism and is practiced diversely in the United States. Ways to care for and honor the dead depend on family traditions, individual religious beliefs, and situational circumstances. It is important that those who are practicing Jewish death care feel empowered to hold a funeral that reflects the wishes of the deceased and the family. Death care is highly personal and individualistic within Judaism, and the diversity of the traditions are apparent in community death practices. It can be helpful to consult a rabbi or religious chaplain who can help connect those close to death and their families to resources for Jews experiencing loss. A religious professional or funeral director can also help the family determine what kinds of personal elements they would like to include or not include in a funeral.

This guide is intended to be an overview of potential options and resources to help Jews prepare for death, care for the body, plan a funeral, and process their grief and mourning. It is not comprehensive and is not intended to be followed exactly. Please feel free to take any parts that feel meaningful and helpful and leave behind those that do not serve you. The process of death can be an overwhelming and difficult time, and this guide is one resource intended to help people navigate it.

For more information on how to hold an independent or home funeral, please visit the Home Funeral Alliance at <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/>.

Judaism and Beliefs Surrounding Death

Similar to many other religious views, Judaism believes that death is a natural process and should not be viewed as a tragedy. Instead, it is understood that death is a part of God's will and full of meaning. Jewish ideas about an afterlife are very diverse, yet all forms of Judaism hold the belief that an afterlife exists. In the Talmud, it is called Sheol, although specifics about its nature are unclear. Some Jews believe that the afterlife looks similar to Christian ideas of Heaven, while others believe that the afterlife is the legacy that one leaves behind in their family and lived memory. There are parts of Jewish scripture that teach of a day of resurrection in which the bodies of those who have died will rise again to enjoy an eternal existence in Zion. The Jewish belief in an afterlife can take many forms and ultimately depends on a person's individual beliefs. While there is rich theology about a Jewish afterlife, it tends to not be the primary focus of the religion or in preparing for death. Instead, Jewish tradition focuses on the life that a person has lived, and making any final necessary amends and arrangements before death.

One common belief in Judaism is that death is simply a transitional phase in which the soul attached to a physical body in life, becomes detached in death. The soul is still on a spiritual journey, it just is no longer anchored to a physical vessel. In preparing for death, Jewish communities will support the dying by providing spiritual care intended to ease the transition from life to death.

Resources For Jewish Theology on Death:

- https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/282496/jewish/How-Jews-Approach-Death.htm
- <https://jewishvirtuallibrary.org/death-and-mourning-in-judaism>
- <https://www.artofdyingwell.org/caring-for-the-dying/deathbed-etiquette/jewish-rituals/>

Preparing For Death

Calling a Rabbi, the Viddui, and the Deathbed Vigil

Jews often begin preparing for death early in life, however when faced with imminent death, they may wish to take specific time to reflect on their lives. When death approaches, it is typical that a local rabbi will be called. The rabbi will be able to help facilitate any particular prayers and rituals the person might want. One such ritual is called viddui which is a kind of deathbed confession. It is a way to express any final regrets, doubts, and is an opportunity to reconcile with God. This prayer can be said by the dying person, or on their behalf by a rabbi or family member. A rabbi will also be able to help the person express any final wishes they have and make any final spiritual amends. The Jewish tradition encourages family and friends to participate in a deathbed vigil which involves there always being a person at the bedside of the dying person. This ritual upholds respect, dignity, and humanity for a person and ensures that they experience death surrounded by community.

Ethical Wills

Another tradition that some Jews participate in is the writing of an ethical will. An ethical will is written to be given to a person's children and descendants after that person has died. The letter usually expresses the most important lessons, values, and morals that the person would like to impart on their family. This tradition is one that dates back to biblical times and is an important way for Jews to leave a meaningful spiritual legacy. For more information on ethical wills, see the resource links below.

Resources on How to Prepare for the Death of a Jew and Provide Spiritual Comfort:

- <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/dying/>
- <https://www.artofdyingwell.org/caring-for-the-dying/deathbed-etiquette/jewish-rituals/>
- Information on Vuddui
 - <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/viddai-the-deathbed-confession/>
- Information on Ethical Wills:
 - <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/writing-and-reading-ethical-wills/>

Caring for the Body

Stages of Mourning and Grief

Jewish tradition honors several different stages of grief and mourning after a person has died. The periods are Aninut, the Funeral, Shiva, Yizkor, Shloshem, the Unveiling/Memorial, and Yahrzeit. Each period has distinct traditions which all aim to help the family and community express grief and process the loss which affects their community.

Aninut

After the moment of death, a close family member may close the eyes and mouth of the deceased. The body is then immediately laid on the floor and is usually covered in a white cloth. Candles may be placed around the body and are lit to indicate the start of Aninut, which is the first stage of Jewish mourning. Blessings and prayers are usually said by the family. Then, the immediate family, (spouse, brothers, sisters, parents, and children), become onens, who are responsible for helping with funeral arrangements and care of the body. They will also take turns sitting with the body until burial to ensure that the body is never left alone.

If using a funeral home, they should be contacted for transport of the body immediately upon death. If the body is staying in the care of the family, they may wish to transport the body to a private residence for preparation. A ritual washing, known as the Tahara, and the covering of the body in a shroud is typical body care for Jewish deceased. This is an important moment that the family will usually want to be involved in, as it signifies the last act of kindness one can do for the person who has died. For more information about how to care for the body in a private residence consult the Home Funeral Alliance Guidebook which can be accessed at <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/>.

Jewish Burials

Burials in the Jewish tradition must be done promptly and usually take place within 24 - 48 hours after the death occurs. Burial is considered the most acceptable way of caring for the body after death, however many who practice Reform Judaism wish to be cremated. Embalming, viewing of the body, and autopsy, (unless required

by law), historically violate Jewish tradition. However, organ donation is acceptable and often encouraged.

The Jewish tradition of burying their dead is itself, a form of natural burial. There is no embalming of the body, and it is shrouded in plain, white sheets which lend themselves to natural decomposition. Often, the body is then placed in a casket made of soft wood which is completely biodegradable. The casket will eventually break down which allows for natural decomposition and the return of the body to the earth. Jewish scripture tells that the body will return to the dust that it was formed from, (see Genesis 3:19), which aligns with the principles of a natural burial. For more information on how to hold Jewish funerals that are environmentally friendly, consult the resources below on “green burials”. Combining green burial practices with the already eco-friendly Jewish traditions can be a meaningful way to honor a person who was fond of the environment and nature.

Resources on Body Care and Burial Practices:

- https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/282500/jewish/The-First-Things-to-Do-Right-After-Passing.htm
- <https://www.funeralpartners.co.uk/help-advice/arranging-a-funeral/types-of-funerals/jewish-funeral-customs/>
- <https://www.jcfs.org/our-services/jewish-community-programs/illness-loss-grief/guide-for-the-grieving/traditional-mourning>
- <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%203&version=NIV>
- Green Burials
 - <https://reformjudaism.org/blog/how-jewish-burials-are-actually-green-burials-too>
 - <https://www.serenityridgemd.com/comparing-natural-burial-traditions-across-different-religions/>
 - <https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/plan-a-green-burial/>

Jewish Funerals

Funeral Arrangements and Attire and Burial Proceedings

Jewish funerals are either held in a Jewish funeral home, at graveside, in a synagogue, or at a family home. The family may have a specific burial plot in which all members of the family are usually buried. The person who has died may have left particular requests regarding the funeral arrangements, which should be honored to the best of the family's ability.

Led by a local rabbi, the funeral includes the recitation of many prayers, psalms, and other kinds of liturgy. Funeral guests usually tear a small piece of clothing or black cloth, (to be provided by the rabbi or funeral director), to represent the end of the physical relationship with the deceased, although their emotional and spiritual relationships are everlasting. While they do this ritual, the rabbi and congregation recite the "Baruch Dayan Emet", which is a prayer meaning "God is the True Judge".

Unless the family states otherwise, guests can expect to dress modestly in dark colors like black, navy, and dark blue. Men usually wear a Kippah.

Flowers are not appropriate at Jewish funerals as they are associated with joyous celebrations. For the same reason, music is not played and songs are not typically sung.

After the end of the prayers and psalms, the body is lowered into the grave. There is usually a brief memorial or unveiling ceremony after the grave marker is placed in which a rabbi recites some psalms and prayers over the grave. After loved ones have said their final goodbyes, they will typically proceed to the family home where they will begin to observe shiva.

Resources on Jewish Funerals and Burial:

- <https://jewishvirtuallibrary.org/death-and-mourning-in-judaism>
- <https://www.shermanschapel.com/Jewish-funeral-etiquette>
- <https://www.sholomchapel.com/resources/our-blog/what-to-wear-to-a-jewish-funeral-a-comprehensive-guide-to-respectful-attire>
- https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/367836/jewish/Basic-Laws-of-a-Jewish-Funeral.htm
- <https://rohatynjewishheritage.org/en/culture/death-burial-mourning/>
- <https://reformjudaism.org/beliefs-practices/lifecycle-rituals/death-mourning/preparing-jewish-funeral-guide>

Jewish Mourning Period and Grief

Sitting Shiva

Shiva is a typical seven day mourning period that is observed by many Jewish communities. It functions to honor the dead and allow the family to process their feelings of grief and sorrow. Some communities may observe the full seven day period while others may want to have a shorter timeframe. Consulting a rabbi can be a good way to determine the appropriate length of shiva to fit the needs of each community.

Shiva usually starts immediately after the burial where a close family friend or extended family member prepares a meal. Bagels and lox, bread, hard-boiled eggs, and other round foods are usually served to symbolize the cyclical nature of life and death. As guests enter the home, they each take a turn washing their hands at the door in a basin of water. This historically was a way for those who buried the body to clean their hands before a meal and symbolizes the transition from the funeral to the mourning period.

A shiva candle is usually lit which is intended to stay burning for the entire seven day period. Various religious ceremonies may be held at the house over the period of shiva which allow the community different opportunities to express their feelings of grief and sorrow. Many of the rituals acknowledge the presence of God in the world and recognize the fact that death is ultimately a part of his will and a natural process of life.

Customs Around Shiva

Shiva customs usually include abstaining from using technology and looking in mirrors to avoid concerns with vanity. Mourners usually sit low to the ground on stools or cushions to acknowledge the low spirits. Open expressions of grief like crying are encouraged and are thought to help the family move on from the death in a healthy and meaningful way. Stories and memories of the person's life may be shared with the community and family.

Mourners are allowed and encouraged to visit the family multiple times during shiva as community gathering is a significant part of the mourning process. Flowers and gifts are not acceptable gifts during shiva, with the exception of food. Guests are

encouraged to bring food and alcohol to the family to ease their grieving. The Kaddish is a prayer said daily during the shiva which is a good time for mourners to gather at the house where shiva is taking place. The prayer is meant to be said in community and reminds each member of the Jewish tradition of the greatness of God.

The End of Shiva and Processing Grief Afterwards

The end of shiva is sometimes marked by taking a walk around the block - the first time that the family will have left the house in seven days. It marks the reintegration of the mourners into daily life.

There are many opportunities for the family to continue honoring their dead and grieving once shiva ends. Ceremonies of remembrance take place during high holidays which are known as yizkor. Shloshem is the first month of mourning after the death which is characterized by continuing to say a daily Kaddish and is celebrated by a gathering in which poems and prayers about the deceased are shared. The yahrzeit is the yearly anniversary of the death in which a 24-hour candle is lit to honor the dead. Families may visit the gravesite and hold small celebrations to commemorate the deceased and hold them in community memory.

Resources on Jewish Grieving and Mourning:

- <https://reformjudaism.org/beliefs-practices/lifecycle-rituals/death-mourning/everything-you-need-know-about-jewish-custom-shiva>
- <https://sharonmemorial.com/customs-and-traditions/the-mourners-kaddish/>
- <https://www.sholomchapel.com/resources/our-blog/what-is-the-7-day-jewish-death-understanding-the-significance-of-shiva-in-jewish-mourning>
- <https://www.icfs.org/our-services/jewish-community-programs/illness-loss-grief/guide-for-the-grieving/traditional-mourning>
- https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/281618/jewish/Kaddish-Observances.htm
- https://www.shiva.com/learning-center/death-and-mourning/jewish-funerals-and-burial?srsId=AfmBOoq5D3GVbOmlq00W2go45ZW7g_kT2mxzED_nAb3xSAVaoCJmTZha

Complete List of Online Resources

National Home Funeral Alliance

- <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/>
- State Laws:
 - <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/state-laws>

Resources For Jewish Theology on Death:

- https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/282496/jewish/How-Jews-Approach-Death.htm
- <https://jewishvirtuallibrary.org/death-and-mourning-in-judaism>
- <https://www.artofdyingwell.org/caring-for-the-dying/deathbed-etiquette/jewish-rituals/>

Resources on How to Prepare for the Death of a Jew and Provide Spiritual Comfort:

- <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/dying/>
- <https://www.artofdyingwell.org/caring-for-the-dying/deathbed-etiquette/jewish-rituals/>
- Information on Viddui
 - <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/viddui-the-deathbed-confession/>
- Information on Ethical Wills:
 - <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/writing-and-reading-ethical-wills/>

Resources on Body Care and Burial Practices:

- https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/282500/jewish/The-First-Things-to-Do-Right-After-Passing.htm
- <https://www.funeralpartners.co.uk/help-advice/arranging-a-funeral/types-of-funerals/jewish-funeral-customs/>
- <https://www.icfs.org/our-services/jewish-community-programs/illness-loss-grief/guide-for-the-grieving/traditional-mourning>
- <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%203&version=NIV>
- Green Burials
 - <https://reformjudaism.org/blog/how-jewish-burials-are-actually-green-burials-too>
 - <https://www.serenityridgemd.com/comparing-natural-burial-traditions-across-different-religions/>
 - <https://www.greenburialcouncil.org/plan-a-green-burial/>

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- <https://www.shermanschapel.com/Jewish-funeral-etiquette>
- <https://www.sholomchapel.com/resources/our-blog/what-to-wear-to-a-jewish-funeral-a-comprehensive-guide-to-respectful-attire>
- https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/367836/jewish/Basic-Laws-of-a-Jewish-Funeral.htm
- <https://rohatynjewishheritage.org/en/culture/death-burial-mourning/>
- <https://reformjudaism.org/beliefs-practices/lifecycle-rituals/death-mourning/preparing-jewish-funeral-guide>

Resources on Jewish Grieving and Mourning:

- <https://reformjudaism.org/beliefs-practices/lifecycle-rituals/death-mourning/everything-you-need-know-about-jewish-custom-shiva>
- <https://sharonmemorial.com/customs-and-traditions/the-mourners-kaddish/>
- <https://www.sholomchapel.com/resources/our-blog/what-is-the-7-day-jewish-death-understanding-the-significance-of-shiva-in-jewish-mourning>
- <https://www.icfs.org/our-services/jewish-community-programs/illness-loss-grief/guide-for-the-grieving/traditional-mourning>
- https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/281618/jewish/Kaddish-Observances.htm
- https://www.shiva.com/learning-center/death-and-mourning/jewish-funerals-and-burial?srsId=AfmBOoq5D3GVbOmlg00W2go45ZW7g_kT2mxzED_nAb3xSAVaoGJmTZha