



A Guide to Jewish Funeral Traditions and the Mourning Process

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Preface

When a loved one dies, those left behind are often thrown into turmoil. Jewish mourning and funeral practices have evolved over the millennia to offer consolation to those grieving and guidance on how best to lay their loved ones to rest so that they can start healing and eventually find their way back to a normal life.

If this Guide finds you mourning a loved one, we offer our deepest sympathies. We hope that the information we share here helps ease the transition for you and gives you a better understanding of how people of Jewish faith



view death and burial. Sometimes understanding what to expect can help ease the pain of loss.

Whether you are in mourning or simply interested in what Judaism has to say about funeral and mourning practices, this guide will take you through the entire process, as well as answer some frequently asked questions. We hope by the end you will feel you have learned something and be better prepared when attending a funeral or being in the position of planning one.



Meaning of a Jewish Funeral

A Jewish funeral sets itself apart from the funerals of other traditions in that they are viewed as an interactive event, where the community comes together to bury their loved one, both figuratively and literally.

As we will see, the tradition of placing earth into the grave is a symbolic rite that makes burial participatory. It is seen as a symbolic gesture akin to tucking a loved one in at night. This is also known as the “Greatest Mitzvah” because it is one that cannot be reciprocated. The deceased isn’t just buried by the rabbi, though he or she plays a role. And they are not buried by the cemetery workers, though they too play a role. In a very real sense, the deceased is buried by everyone that attends the funeral. This shared mitzvah is the heart of the Jewish funeral. As Jews, we are tasked with the burial of our loved ones, and should care for each other in life, as well as in death.

For Jews, burial is an intrinsic right of the deceased. No matter whether they were friend or foe, family or stranger, criminal or saint, every person deserves a proper burial. In Jewish tradition, leaving a body unburied is considered a terrible insult to the soul of the person who has passed on. The funeral is the culmination of a life well-lived, and it must be honored.



Religious Customs

Jewish tradition is rich with funeral customs, accrued over the entirety of Jewish history. These customs dictate how a body should be prepared, proper burial procedures, who is considered a mourner, a mourner's responsibilities, and a host of other details. Most of these will be discussed naturally throughout this book, but a few bear special mentions here.

Unlike other religious traditions, the status of "mourner" is very specifically defined under Jewish custom. This isn't to say that other people would not be in mourning, but because mourners bear certain responsibilities to the deceased under Jewish law, the term is limited to a small subset of those likely to attend the funeral.

Under Jewish custom, only first-degree family members are considered mourners. Children, parents, spouses, and siblings are included in this category. This is not meant to belittle the grief of other family members and close friends, but more to comfort those whose lineage is closest religiously. Anyone may attend the funeral, but direct mourners are afforded special considerations

It is the responsibility of the mourners to plan the funeral. While this can be difficult, it is the immediate family that is most in tune with the wishes of the deceased, and they are the people most motivated to provide a proper goodbye. Additionally, in some cases, planning the funeral can be a welcome distraction from what can be crippling grief.



Religious Customs

Many of the customs surrounding funerals revolve around the proper treatment of the deceased's body. There is a ritual washing that must be observed prior to burial. Embalming is prohibited. There is a prohibition against cremation as well, as traditionally it is viewed as disrespectful to the body, which should be allowed to naturally return to the earth. While this rule has relaxed in recent times, some Jewish cemeteries still refuse to bury cremains.

It is also generally expected that Jews should be buried in Jewish cemeteries and that non-Jews are not allowed to be buried in the same area as Jews. This is also changing, and how stringently this restriction is followed depends on the by-laws of the particular grounds to be used for burial.

Flowers, a mainstay for many funeral traditions, do not play a role in Jewish funerals. Instead, those grieving are encouraged to make donations as tzedakah to a charity that was dear to the heart of the deceased. Often, charities will be suggested in the words spoken at the funeral service.

Finally, although there can be a brief visitation prior to the start of the funeral service, services are always closed casket. This is both a sign of deference to the deceased and a mercy to the mourners at the funeral.



Funeral Arrangements

It is traditional for burial to occur as quickly as possible after death. Religiously, it is preferred for burial to occur within 24 hours if possible, but this period is often extended to allow for family members and friends to be able to take part in the funeral service.



Modern times have given way for families to spread throughout the globe, and many rabbis and spiritual leaders will share the sentiment that it is worth waiting a period of time to ensure those can attend. There are practical considerations for this in addition to symbolic reasons that we will learn about later.

Jewish custom does not allow preservation of the body, including embalming, which means burial should happen quickly to avoid decomposition. Judaism has always viewed the dead as unclean, both physically and ritualistically. It's therefore important to adhere to the timeframe and make sure burial takes place and in a timely manner.



Funeral Arrangements

This should happen with as little extravagance as possible. Jewish tradition teaches that the burial rituals are minimalistic and modest. Tradition deems that necessary resources should not be wasted on those that can't use them. This is partly the reason for many of the prohibitions against pomp and ornate decoration.



Another consideration is pallbearers. Six can be chosen, and they all need to be old enough and strong enough to fulfill their duties. Being a pallbearer at a Jewish funeral is considered a great honor, and a selfless service to the mourners and the deceased. Anyone can be asked to fulfill this responsibility except for the mourners, who must not burden themselves with funeral details once the service has begun.



The Jewish Funeral

A Jewish funeral focuses as much upon the deceased as it does on those loved ones left behind. As with many elements of Jewish tradition, it is a study in contradiction. The funeral is the acknowledgment of a life and a means for mourners to begin coming to terms with their loss. It is significant and dignified, yet simple and uncomplicated. It is sadness laced with the hope of better things to come.

Jewish tradition puts value in simplicity. Plain wooden caskets are usually preferred. Ornate caskets are seen as stealing focus from what is most important, the people.

Also, it is important that a person who has passed away be able to biodegrade naturally, allowing the body to return to the earth. Therefore, an all wood casket is required and the reason why embalming is generally disallowed.



The body should be wrapped in a simple, white linen cloth with no extraneous adornments.



The Chapel Service

A Jewish funeral can begin in a chapel or sanctuary. Before the service, mourners may greet attendees. Attendees wait outside of the sanctuary while the mourners make their last preparations before the start of the service. Only then are those attending permitted to enter the sanctuary.



Just before the start of the service, the mourners inside the sanctuary will have a piece of black ribbon attached to their clothing. This represents a torn garment and this tearing ceremony is meant to remind mourners that the fabric of their family life has suffered an irreparable tear. The black ribbon is also a symbolic reminder to those attending that the mourners have finished taking care of the funeral arrangements and it is now the community's responsibility to take care of them. These ribbons will remain on the mourners throughout shiva, which will be discussed in greater detail later.



The Chapel Service

Once all the attendees have entered the sanctuary and found their seats, the mourners will enter, sitting in the reserved front row.

After opening prayers are read, which often include sections from the Psalms, the eulogy begins. This occupies the lion's share of the sanctuary service, and it differs somewhat from eulogies found in other religious traditions.

In a Jewish eulogy, the rabbi will commonly take stories provided by the mourners and use these to paint a compelling portrait of the deceased that captures the essence of who they were to the people that loved them. This is then used to relate valuable life-lessons that are inspired by Jewish tradition and the life of the deceased.

Along with this eulogy, loved ones are welcome to come up and speak from their heart about the person that has passed. Having the opportunity to reflect in public on what made the deceased so special to each mourner is often an important part of the grieving process in the Jewish tradition.

After closing prayers, the pallbearers recess from the sanctuary with the casket, the mourners exit the sanctuary, removing themselves from the attendees again to wait for the funeral procession. They are then followed by the attendees, after which everyone follows one another in a funeral procession, either on foot or by car, to the gravesite. Accompanying the body to its final resting place is considered a high mitzvah in Jewish tradition.



A Jewish Burial

The graveside portion of a Jewish funeral service is generally even shorter than the sanctuary portion. The reason for the brevity of Jewish funerals is twofold.



Tradition holds that a soul cannot return to heaven until the body it inhabited has been laid to rest. Until then it remains in a state of limbo. Therefore, as a service to the deceased's soul, funeral burials are not belabored and held as quickly after death as possible.

But there's a practical reason for the brevity of the service as well. The pain of a funeral can be overwhelming for many mourners, and while the service helps in the mourning process, rendering it unnecessarily long may have negative effect, extending the difficulty of saying goodbye. And so, services are kept relatively brief.



A Jewish Burial

Once the funeral procession arrives, all the attendees will take their places, and then the pallbearers will carry the casket to the grave. Prayers are recited and the casket is slowly lowered into the ground.

Everyone in attendance then recites the mourner's Kaddish. This is traditionally done graveside for the first time and then is recited by the mourners once a day throughout their ritual mourning period, which lasts roughly 37 days or a full year if mourning a parent. We will delve into this in more depth in the next section. The Kaddish is then recited one final time at the anniversary of death.

The most impactful moment of a Jewish burial is the conclusion, when the mourners, and then each person in attendance is permitted to toss a handful or shovelful of earth onto the casket. Similar accompanying the body to the gravesite, throwing earth down into the grave is considered a high mitzvah. It's a sign of respect to the departed, and a final statement of love. As a shared act among all those in attendance, it helps with closure, providing a moment to say goodbye, and exists as a final gift to the deceased.

This concludes the burial service. Attendees will accompany the mourners back to the house where shiva is to be observed to comfort the grieving and provide a needed sense of community. Traditionally, shiva will be held in the home of one of the mourners and will be discussed more in depth later in this guide.



Periods of Mourning

Mourning in the Jewish tradition is highly ritualized. This system has evolved over the centuries as a way to place limits on mourning. This is important because as much as we want to remember those we have lost, we also eventually need to give ourselves permission to move on.

This can be difficult for many, as the relinquishing of grief can be tied up with feelings of terrible guilt. By ritualistically defining discrete periods for the mourning process, grieving parties know when they can mourn, and when they are allowed to finally let go.

Mourning is divided into two main periods, **Aninut** and **Avelut**, the latter of which is itself divided into a number of periods.

Aninut

Aninut, or “intense grieving,” is the period between death and the conclusion of the burial. This short interval assumes mourners will be overcome with grief and provides a temporary exemption from certain religious obligations to which the observant must normally adhere.



Periods of Mourning

Avelut

Avelut, or “mourning,” follows directly after Aninut. During Avelut, tradition holds that mourners should not listen to music or attend festive occasions like parties, weddings, or bar/bat mitzvahs, unless absolutely necessary. Avelut is a period of mourning, and it should be respected as such. This is important for the mourner because once the traditional mourning periods are complete, mourning officially ends, so it’s important for them to let themselves feel what they need while tradition allows.



Of course, you will still grieve for your loved one after mourning officially ends, and this is to be expected. However, observing defined mourning periods allows you to get back to normal life while still maintaining the memory of a lost loved one.



Periods of Mourning

Shiva

Referred to colloquially as “sitting shiva”, shiva is the first part of Avelut and lasts seven days. During this time the immediate family, the traditional mourners, stay in their home to receive guests. They are expected to focus on nothing but the mourning process and should not allow themselves to be distracted by external considerations.

As such, there are prohibitions against self-care generally. Beautification of the mourner and their surroundings is considered a triviality to be ignored. Mirrors in the home are traditionally covered, as vanity is considered antithetical to the mourning process.

Other restrictions on mourners include a cessation of sexual activities and other forms of entertainment and diversion. If possible, mourners should not return to work until after the seven days of shiva have completed. It is important for mourners to fully step out of their normal lives so that they can focus all of their energies on grieving and dealing with their loss.

Shiva starts directly following the burial and commences with a ceremonial meal with funeral attendees back at the home where shiva will be observed. Eggs are commonly included in the meal, as they are a symbol of life. Wine and meats, on the other hand, commonly held as joyful foods, are forbidden.



Periods of Mourning

During shiva, friends and family are encouraged to make “shiva calls,” dropping by during certain predefined periods throughout the day to offer words of consolation, and to spend time with their grief-stricken loved ones. Visitors will commonly bring food to those in mourning and help out with household chores so that those sitting shiva do not have to be distracted by cooking and cleaning.

Shloshim

Shloshim is the Hebrew word for 30, and it is the section of Avelut that picks up when the seven days of shiva have concluded. After shiva is completed, mourners are permitted to return to their normal routines. However, during Shloshim men are forbidden to cut their hair or shave their beards, and all mourners are expected to avoid festive occasions or engage in joyful activities, such as dancing or listening to music.



Periods of Mourning

Shneim Asar Chodesh

The end of Shloshim marks the completion of the ritualistic mourning period. However, for those mourning a parent, the prohibitions observed during shloshim extend for an additional eleven months, which comprises Shneim Asar Chodesh. Mourners should also recite a daily Kaddish during this period.

Headstone Unveiling

Jewish traditions vary regionally on when the headstone should be unveiled at the grave. A few will add the headstone within a week or two. In Israel, it is common to unveil the headstone after Shloshim. But in the United States, because of regional weather and cemetery stipulations, it is most common to wait until the first anniversary of the person's passing and hold an unveiling ceremony graveside. The process in which a stone is created can take upwards of 6 months, so although the unveiling can be done later, the planning for the stone should commence after the Shloshim mourning period.

This is a much more joyful occasion than the funeral and is considered a celebration of their life. It is also commonly the moment where those grieving can let go and move on with their lives.



Periods of Mourning

The headstone is set in place prior to the unveiling ceremony but remains covered with a cloth until the very end, when the cloth is removed, and all attendees get their first glimpse of the completed monument.

Yahrzeit

As a final act of remembrance, each year on the anniversary of the loved one's death, yahrzeit is observed. The mourner's Kaddish is recited in memory of the departed and money is commonly donated to charity in their name. Many traditions also allow the lighting of a yahrzeit candle in the person's honor. This candle burns for roughly 24 hours, and its snuffing signifies the end of that year's yahrzeit.



How To Tell Children About Death

Explaining death to young children can be difficult. Parents are often worried about saying the wrong thing or unnecessarily scaring their children. However, being open and honest is the best way to deal with such a difficult situation. Let your child ask whatever questions they may have and then answer them as honestly as possible.



Certainly, if a close loved one has passed away, a conversation about death is necessary, but it is often good to start talking about death as soon as a child is old enough to understand the concept. If your child understands that it is okay to talk about death, they will be more likely to ask questions. The more death is treated as a natural part of life, the less fearful they will be.

It is important for children to understand the finality of death. When talking to them about it, you should impress on them the difference between death and sleep. You will awaken from sleep, but you cannot return from death. This seems cruel, but Jewish tradition holds that it is worse to allow false hope. It might seem a mercy to tell your child that their loved one has “gone away for a while” but that plants the idea that maybe one day they will return, and this simply will not happen. It is better that the child understands that the person they loved will not be coming back.



How To Tell Children About Death

Many Jews hold no illusions about the possibility of an afterlife, even though Judaism includes notions of Heaven. While a parent should not tell their child stories of a heavenly reuniting with lost loved ones if they do not personally believe it, they should not categorically deny the possibility of this to their children. Because ultimately we do not really know what happens after death, and the thought that it might one day be possible to see our loved one again can be very comforting. Since we cannot rule out the possibility, it can be offered for consolation if the child would benefit from it.

A great way to talk to your children about death is to remind them about how Judaism regards the memory of a loved one. For Jews, no one is ever truly dead if they are kept alive in our memories. By holding onto cherished memories of lost loved ones, we can keep them alive in our minds and in our experience. This is why Jews observe yahrzeit. It's important to always remember those you love, and when children understand this, they can rest easier knowing that the person they lost is always with them as long as they remember them.



Frequently Asked Questions

Can I be buried in a Jewish cemetery if I have a tattoo?

This is a common misconception. While the Torah does prohibit Jews from getting tattoos, there is nothing in Jewish law that prevents tattooed individuals from being buried in a Jewish cemetery.

How long do I have to buy a monument?

There is no hard rule about when monuments should be purchased or installed. The mourner should not look to purchase a monument before the end of the Shloshim mourning period. After the mourning period, it is considered a mitzvah to mark a Jewish grave with a permanent marker. It is commonplace to have your monument ready within the first year of death and have it installed prior to the unveiling ceremony.



Frequently Asked Questions

Do I need a rabbi?

No. A rabbi is not required for a Jewish funeral. While they are the most frequent officiant, cantors can be used as well. Other officiants are also permitted so long as they have a good understanding of the proceedings of the funeral service and are competent enough to lead one.

What do I do if I don't have a cemetery plot?

Jewish tradition holds that a cemetery plot should be purchased during a person's lifetime and should be owned outright by the time of their death. If you don't own a plot, you can contact a Jewish burial society for help in tracking down possible ancestral plots or to purchase one for yourself.

Can my non-Jewish spouse be buried with me in a Jewish cemetery?

This depends on how observant you are. Orthodox Jews still forbid interfaith burial in Jewish cemeteries. Reform cemeteries long since did away with this prohibition. Conservative Jewish cemeteries maintained this restriction until 2010 when new rules were released to help accommodate the growing number of interfaith marriages. Conservative Jewish cemeteries now maintain special sections that allow interfaith burials.



Frequently Asked Questions

What are my options for a military burial?

Jewish veterans have the same entitlements through the Veterans Administration as any other veteran. Depending on eligibility, the veteran, their spouse, and in certain circumstances, their impaired child may be buried in a National Military Cemetery. There is also the option of having an official Military Honor Guard present at a chapel or cemetery. Veterans may also be entitled to other benefits, such as a free certified copy of a death certificate, a military sponsored head or foot stone, a death benefit, and a host of other entitlements that can be made available through the VA.

Who notifies social security of my loved one's passing?

The funeral home will take care of this notification. Just be certain you supply them with your loved one's social security number.



About the Author



Adam Lawrence Novak comes from a line of multiple generations of funeral home directors in his family. He has been involved in the mortuary sciences since 2006. His expertise is varied and multidisciplinary and is greatly informed by his faith.

He gives back regularly to his community, having served as member of the Mid Island Y - JCC Board of Directors, and as Chairman for the Jewish Community Relations Council of Long Island. He is also active in a number of professional organizations, including the UJA Long Island Business Leadership and the JNF Young Professionals Long Island Leadership Board.

If you have questions or concerns regarding a funeral or planning for one, please contact Adam [here](#).

