



A Guide For Mourners

Who Are Mourners?

According to Jewish tradition, the laws of mourning apply to one who encounters the death of a parent, sibling, child or spouse. Of course, we may experience grief and mourn the death of other close relatives or friends but we are not obliged to observe the formal mourning practices.

Shiva (Mourning Week)

Shiva is the seven-day mourning period, observed by the family of the deceased, beginning on the day of burial and continuing for six additional days with a break for Shabbat. The purpose of shiva is to give mourners a chance to separate themselves from their usual activities and to spend time with people who share memories of the deceased, to gain comfort from loved ones and friends, and to leave time and space to allow the grieving process to unfold. It is usually observed in the home of the deceased or of a mourner.

- Shiva commences immediately upon returning from the cemetery with the partaking of the se'udat havra-ah (the meal of consolation), which is often prepared by friends, extended family and/or the community. The meal often consists of round foods (such as eggs or bagels) to symbolize the continuity of life.
- It is also traditional for mourners to remain in the home, to sit on low stools, and to wear non-leather footwear. Mourners may also follow the traditional practice of refraining from the routine of daily life which includes washing themselves, changing clothes, combing hair, shaving and applying makeup. Mirrors may be covered in the house of mourning to take the focus away from outer appearances.

Rabbis:

J. Rolando Matalon
Felicia L. Sol
Erin R. Glazer
Marcelo R. Bronstein

Hazzan:

Ari Priven

Executive Director:

Colin A. Weil

Community House

270 West 89th Street
New York, NY
10024-1705

Sanctuary

257 West 88th Street
New York, NY
10024-1705

Tel: (212) 787-7600**Fax:** (212) 496-7600**Online:** www.bj.org

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- While it is a mitzvah to visit the mourners and bring food, it is essential that the condolence visit not become a social occasion. Visitors extending their condolences are encouraged to sit quietly, allowing the mourners to set the tone. It is customary to extend condolences, but to wait for the mourners to initiate further conversation. It is not appropriate to give greetings or salutations or to ask questions as to how the mourner feels.
- In lieu of flowers, it is appropriate to give tzedakah to an organization that has meaning for the mourners and/or the deceased.
- During shiva, mourners recite the Kaddish at morning, afternoon, and evening services. B'nai Jeshurun's morning minyan (Sunday through Friday) and evening minyan (Monday through Thursday) are open to mourners wishing to pray and recite the Kaddish. BJ can also assist in providing minyan leaders and participants for an evening minyan at the shiva home.

Shabbat during the Week of Shiva

Public shiva observance is suspended for Shabbat, from sundown on Friday until havdalah on Saturday evening. On Shabbat, mourners are encouraged to attend services at B'nai Jeshurun and recite the Kaddish with the community. The Hevra Kadisha will arrange to escort them into the sanctuary on Friday evening (as is traditional) at the conclusion of the singing of the joyful Lekha Dodi. The mourners are greeted by the congregation with the following words of consolation:

Hamakom yenaheem etkhem betokh
she-ar avelei tziyon virushalayim.

May God comfort you together with
all the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.

If a holiday occurs during the shiva week, please consult the rabbi to discuss the length of the shiva. The completion of shiva is observed with a walk around the block, the resumption of work and other regular activities following the minyan on the morning of the seventh day. For Jews, remembrance of the dead is a great obligation. This commitment is observed in several ways.

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Shloshim

Mourning is not completed with shiva, but continues for a total of thirty days from the day of burial during which time mourners recite the Kaddish daily. Although mourners are obligated to continue reciting the Kaddish for a total of eleven months from date of death only in the case of a parent, one may choose to do so for other relatives. The recitation of the Kaddish helps mourners to reconnect with the Jewish community, giving continuity to our lives during this difficult period.

During shloshim, mourners return to work. Traditionally, they do not attend parties with music and dancing, other forms of public entertainment, shave or buy new clothes. When mourning a parent, there are some restrictions that continue for eleven months. Someone on the Hevra Kadisha committee will call mourners at the end of the shloshim period.

Yahrzeit and the Unveiling

Yahrzeit (the anniversary of the death) is observed by lighting a special candle that burns for 24 hours on the eve of the actual date by the Hebrew calendar. The funeral home will give you a perpetual calendar and you will also be reminded of the date by B'nai Jeshurun so that you may attend the morning minyan and recite the Kaddish. You will also be invited to participate in a group aliyah on the Shabbat closest to the actual date. It is also customary, if at all possible, to visit the gravesite on the yahrzeit.

The unveiling, when prayers and reading are recited and a headstone dedicated, is customarily performed prior to the first anniversary of the death although it can be done at any time after the conclusion of shiva.

Yizkor (Memorial Service)

The Yizkor Service is held four times each year on Yom Kippur, the last day of Pesach, the second day of Shavuot, and on Shemini Atzeret. It is customary to light a yahrzeit candle at home on the evening prior to these holy days and to visit the cemetery prior to the High Holy Days. It is traditional to give charity at this time in memory of all the dead, not only one's own family and friends, but of the larger Jewish community as well. At B'nai Jeshurun, a card and envelope is handed to everyone with the siddur for this purpose.

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Living Will and Health Care Proxy

Jewish tradition teaches that life is a blessing and a gift from God. We must therefore value life and respect our bodies. Although we have the responsibility to care for ourselves and seek the necessary medical treatment, modern advances in medicine and its practice have raised many new questions. In addition, they allow each of us to participate in the decisions regarding our own health care. Should we lose the ability to make those decisions, it is important for us to make our wishes known in advance. This can be done through a health care proxy, or durable power of attorney for health care, which allows you to designate a health care agent to make decisions on your behalf. An instruction directive, or "living will," asks that you state your preferences regarding types of treatment decisions that may arise. These and other documents are available from the [Rabbinical Assembly](#). Since decisions of this sort should not be made in haste, you may wish to discuss the matter with the rabbi.

Reading List

- *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* by Rabbi Maurice Lamm, Jonathan David, New York 1969
- *Mourning and Mitzvah: A Guided Journal for Walking the Mourner's Path Through Grief to Healing* by Anne Brener, Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont 1993
- *Consolation, The Spiritual Journey Beyond Grief* by Rabbi Maurice Lamm, The Jewish Publication Society, New York 2004
- *The Jewish Mourner's Book of Why* by Arthur Kolatch, Jonathan David, New York 1993
- *On Death and Dying* by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, Collier Books, Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., New York 1969
- *The Denial of Death* by Ernest Becker, The Free Press, a Division of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., New York 1973

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