



InterfaithFamily.com's mission is to empower people in interfaith relationships – individuals, couples, families and their children – to make Jewish choices, and to encourage Jewish communities to welcome them.

InterfaithFamily.com offers consultation and resources for synagogues, agencies and schools of all affiliations to assist them in their welcome and engagement of interfaith families and all those who are interested in exploring Judaism.

You can join the InterfaithFamily.com Network at  
<http://www.interfaithfamily.com/join>

To subscribe to InterfaithFamily.com's bi-weekly email newsletter visit  
<http://www.interfaithfamily.com/subscribe>

Professionals or volunteers in outreach can join the Resource Center for Program Providers at: [www.interfaithfamily.com/rcpp](http://www.interfaithfamily.com/rcpp). If you are a rabbi or cantor, find the Resource Center for Jewish Clergy at [www.interfaithfamily.com/rcjc](http://www.interfaithfamily.com/rcjc)

To list your organization on the Network and advertise your events, visit [www.interfaithfamily.com/organizations](http://www.interfaithfamily.com/organizations) and click on Register an Organization

Karen Kushner, Chief Education Officer and  
Director of the Resource Center for Program Providers  
[karenk@interfaithfamily.com](mailto:karenk@interfaithfamily.com)

Edmund Case, Chief Executive Officer  
[edc@interfaithfamily.com](mailto:edc@interfaithfamily.com)

*InterfaithFamily.com gratefully acknowledges the support of  
the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund and  
the Walter and Elise Haas Fund.*

This booklet is one of a series originally created by Karen Kushner at The Jewish Welcome Network. A previous version of some of the booklets was published by Project Welcome of the Union for Reform Judaism: [www.urj.org/outreach](http://www.urj.org/outreach).

90 Oak Street  
Newton, MA 02464

1190 Green Street  
San Francisco, CA 94109

# Jewish Mourning Customs for Interfaith Families



## What Jewish values are expressed in death and mourning?

Just as Judaism prescribes a way of living Jewishly, there is also a prescribed way to bury and mourn Jewishly. There are two guiding principles that apply to all aspects of Jewish burial and mourning:

***K'vod hamet*** - the honoring of the dead

Respect for the dead is expressed by caring for the body, the container of the soul, by returning it to the earth in its natural state.

***Nichum avelim*** - Comforting the mourner

Comforting a mourner includes community support with meals and company to encourage the mourner to confront their loss. A step-by-step process of returning to work and the world leads the mourner through the first difficult year following a loss.

## What steps are taken when a Jew dies?

If the family belongs to a synagogue, they contact their rabbi or administrator of the synagogue who will contact the funeral home; otherwise, they call the funeral home directly and the director will help coordinate many of the funeral details. The burial is scheduled as soon as possible after death (except for the Sabbath or Jewish holidays) as both a token of respect and as a way of caring for the mourners' feelings, since the hard work of grief does not begin until after the funeral.

## Sources

The articles below and many others are available at [www.interfaithfamily.com](http://www.interfaithfamily.com)

“Jewish Burial and Mourning Practice for Non-Jewish Relatives” by Rabbi Paul J. Citrin

“Judaism on Interfaith Mourning Issues” by Rabbi Carl Perkins

“Interfaith Mourning Issues: A Reconstructionist Approach” by Rabbi Richard Hirsch

See also *Building the Faith: A Book of Inclusion for Dual Faith Families*, Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs, [www.fjmc.org](http://www.fjmc.org)

## ***May Jews participate in funerals of other faiths? May Gentiles participate in Jewish funerals?***

**Reform:** Jews mourning relatives and friends may attend funeral services held in a church or funeral chapel, serve as pall bearers and eulogize. At a Roman Catholic mass, Jews do not participate in receiving communion or kneel during the service.

**Conservative:** A relative is eulogized and buried with the religious rituals and ceremonies that were practiced in their lives. It would be a sign of respect to him or her for Jewish relatives to attend a wake or other pre-funeral ceremonies. If it is possible to do so without violating the Sabbath, Jewish relatives should attend the funerals and burials of their relatives.

## **Conclusion**

In Jewish tradition, burial of the dead is sometimes referred to as *Hesed shel emet*, true loving kindness. What we do for the dead is the most sincere and selfless act of caring we can perform, since the dead do not repay us. Burying our Gentile relatives and expressing our grief through Jewish mourning practice is no less of an effort of true loving kindness.

The whole range of Jewish mourning customs is open to anyone in mourning. For example: Jews by Choice say *Kaddish* for their parents; the death of a non-Jewish friend may prompt the wearing of a torn ribbon (*keriah*) that denotes a mourner; and anyone can light a *yahrzeit* (memorial) on the anniversary of a death. And of course, any synagogue member can request bereavement counseling from his or her rabbi, regardless of the deceased's religion - or his own.

Traditionally, the body is washed and dressed in a simple white cotton or linen shroud. As a sign of respect, the body is never left alone from the moment of death until burial.

Jews are buried in a plain, wooden casket which has holes drilled in it so that the body may come in contact with the earth. This is in accordance with Genesis 3:19 "*For dust you are, and to dust you shall return.*" Judaism sees death as a natural process of life and maintains that the body should naturally decompose. For this reason, many rabbis will not officiate at a cremation.

## **What happens at a Jewish funeral?**

Jewish funerals are simple; flowers and music are considered too festive. The funeral service focuses on the loss of a unique individual in the eulogy.

Immediately before the funeral begins, the person officiating performs *kriah*. The officiate either makes a small tear in the garment of the mourner, or in some communities, tears a black ribbon and pins it on the mourner instead. *Kriah* is an outward sign of grief and symbolizes the torn and broken hearts of the mourners.

A Jewish funeral is a brief, simple ceremony of quiet dignity. It consists of:

- A reading of a selection of Psalms
- The eulogy
- A memorial prayer (*El Malei Rachamim*) asking that God shelter the soul of the deceased

In contrast to other traditions, the Jewish liturgy does not speak of heaven as a better place or mention the afterlife at all. There are actually many Jewish ideas about the afterlife

ranging from reincarnation to elaborate visions of heaven, but Jewish liturgy does not include any of them.

Perhaps the most powerful commandment of the Jewish funeral comes after the casket is lowered into the ground. Family and friends shovel the first clods of earth over the casket. The sound of the earth hitting the coffin graphically communicates the reality of the loss, and the work of mourning can begin.

## Comforting the Bereaved

From the moment the funeral ends, the tradition focuses on taking care of the mourning family.



them express their grief over their loss. All born Jews and Jews by Choice honor the memory of their family in the same ways.

**Conservative:** The religious identity of the family member determines the mourning rituals required for that person. Each and every mourning ritual should be examined, and the question should be asked: Is the obligation an example of *y'kara d'shachvei* - respect for the dead?

Once the funeral is over for a Gentile relative, the Jewish family observes seven days of mourning (*shiva*) with all of the traditional Jewish mourning rituals.

**Reconstructionist:** Reconstructionist Jews focus on the emotional and spiritual needs of the surviving family members. The resources of Jewish tradition help Jews throughout the period of loss and mourning. When the non-Jewish spouse/partner in an interfaith marriage dies, it is entirely appropriate for the surviving Jewish spouse/partner to observe the rituals of mourning. For these reasons, Reconstructionist Judaism encourages Jews by Choice to observe Jewish mourning practices for their relatives.

There may be adaptations and/or modifications of Jewish mourning practices. For example, at a *shiva*, there may not be a recitation of the Jewish evening prayers; if there is, the surviving spouse may or may not recite *Kaddish*, but the Jewish members of the congregation present should do so as a way of the community mourning the loss.



The concept of a Jewish cemetery is an extension of Jewish communal identity and cohesion. It is, therefore, desirable for Jews to be buried in a Jewish cemetery. Yet, when a Jew is buried in a secular or Gentile cemetery, a rabbi may officiate.

If a partner or spouse is a practicing member of another faith, a clergyman of that faith officiates at the church or funeral home. If the interment for the deceased is to be in a Jewish cemetery following the funeral, a rabbi officiates at the graveside. If a partner or spouse has been a member of a Jewish family and has been involved in the Jewish community, but has never converted, a rabbi may be able to officiate at the funeral service as well as at the interment.

**Conservative:** The religious identity of the deceased determines the way in which the funeral is conducted. It would generally not be possible for a Gentile family member to be buried in a Jewish cemetery, unless its policies explicitly permitted the burial of Gentile partners or other family members in a separate section. Family members may be buried in a secular community cemetery where some Conservative rabbis will officiate. If the family's rabbi is unwilling to officiate there, maybe he or she can recommend someone else who will be able to officiate at the service.

**Reconstructionist:** Each Reconstructionist synagogue makes an informed decision through study of text and practices guided by the rabbi.

### ***May Jews observe Jewish mourning rituals for relatives who were not Jewish?***

**Reform:** Jewish mourning rituals are observed for a deceased spouse, parent, sibling or child of every religion. These practices are for the support of the living and to help

### ***Who is considered a “mourner”?***

By Jewish law there are seven relatives who are considered “mourners” who perform the commandments and follow the rituals outlined for mourning. They are: husband, wife, brother, sister, mother, father and child.

### ***What are the Jewish customs for mourning?***

Judaism mourning practices are divided into several stages of decreasing intensity. This gives the mourner time to fully grieve, while creating a structure that helps the mourner gradually return to a normal life.

*Shiva* (meaning seven) refers to the first week of mourning after burial. During this period mourners are completely focused on grieving and the range of emotions that follow a loss: fear, anger, sorrow, terror, emptiness, even relief. During these days they are excused from all the daily requirements and also denied its pleasures so they may do the hard work of grieving. Family and friends bring food and companionship to the mourner's home. They listen to memories and look through old photos and create the prayer quorum or *minyan* that recites the daily *Kaddish* prayer.

The second period of mourning is known as *Sheloshim* (meaning thirty), and encompasses the seven days of *Shiva* plus the next 23 days to round out the month. In this period the mourners start returning to their normal routines and activities, but they do not attend festive celebrations where there is music and dancing. Mourners attend services regularly to continue saying *Kaddish*.

The Mourner's *Kaddish*, a prayer recited at Jewish worship is a litany of praise of God and does not mention death or grief. Its unusual rhythmic cadence and rhyming structure has made it become strongly associated with loss for all Jews. The fact that this prayer must be said in the company

of a prayer quorum exemplifies that the Jewish response to bereavement is a communal response. The tradition prescribes the company of others who are often mourners themselves who can share the feelings of loss.

Those who have lost a parent recite *Kaddish* for a full year of mourning. Other relatives may choose to do so as well.

*Yahrzeit* means “a year’s time” in Yiddish. Each year the death is commemorated on the *yahrtzeit*, the anniversary of death according to the Hebrew calendar. The family lights a *yahrtzeit* candle on the evening before, and this candle burns for 24 hours. They recite *Kaddish* on the Shabbat closest to the anniversary date.



## Mourning and Burial in Interfaith Families

### *How can Jews by Choice mourn the death of close relatives who are not Jewish?*

Jews by Choice may feel uncertain about how they should mourn their non-Jewish relatives in a meaningful Jewish manner. Jews by Choice are not obligated to observe Jewish rituals such as *Shiva* for their non-Jewish families of origin. However, Jewish mourning traditions are meant to support

the living, and a Jew by Choice may feel comfort in observing Jewish mourning customs for a non-Jewish spouse, parent, sibling or child.

The mourner may recite *Kaddish* for a non-Jewish relative, read Psalms or study a portion of the Torah in honor of the deceased. He may also observe *Shiva* and follow other traditional Jewish mourning practices. For an excellent resource on the subject, you can download the:

*Guide to Death and Mourning for Interfaith Families* published by [Interfaithfamily.com](http://Interfaithfamily.com) on their website.

There may be interfaith support groups in the community or intermarried synagogue members who have had similar experiences that can be a great source of comfort. The rabbi or other clergy member may be able to introduce you to other bereaved interfaith families in the congregation or to local support groups.

### *May a Gentile be buried in a Jewish cemetery?*

### *May a Jew be buried in a Christian cemetery?*

**Reform:** It is accepted practice to bury a Gentile spouse in a Jewish cemetery. The opinion of Reform thinkers is that the entire cemetery is not consecrated ground, but rather only the individual grave where a body rests is sacred. The Talmud or body of texts that comprises Jewish law (Gittin 61a) states that for the sake of peaceful relations, we may bury Gentiles. Thus, the Reform practice has been to permit the Gentile spouse or partner to be buried in Jewish cemeteries provided there are no symbols of another faith on the person's grave marker. Generally, clergy of other faiths are not permitted to officiate at an interment in a Jewish cemetery.