

# GUIDE TO DEATH AND MOURNING FOR INTERFAITH FAMILIES

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## **Why This Guide?**

Many people come to InterfaithFamily.com to learn about Jewish death and mourning practices. If you are in an interfaith family, you may be coping with some unusual circumstances around death: you could be going to your first Jewish funeral or house of mourning, and want to know what to expect. You might even be in mourning for a close relative the first time you are exposed to a Jewish funeral. Or you might be planning a funeral for someone who has asked for a Jewish burial, and not be quite sure what that means. You might be a Jew burying a family member who is not Jewish, or vice versa. If you are in an interfaith marriage, you may be trying to figure out in advance how to negotiate being buried next to your spouse with Jewish ritual when you die. We give a brief overview here of some of the most typical Jewish death and mourning rituals and practices, and of some of the issues that may come up for people in interfaith families. Whatever choices you make around death and mourning, we hope that you find comfort in them.

## **The Principle Of Honoring The Divine Image In The Human Body**

Jewish death and mourning practices are based on the principle that human beings are created in the divine image, and that people should therefore treat dead bodies with respect. Jewish legal thinkers consider the appropriate burial of the dead a major mitzvah (a religious obligation or good deed). The rabbis of the Talmud called burying the dead an act of the highest degree of loving kindness, because the dead cannot reciprocate. It is also a mitzvah to comfort mourners. By being present and compassionate, family and community members, whether they are Jewish or not, participate in one of life's most meaningful psychological and spiritual experiences.

### **Purification on the borders of life and death**

Traditional Jewish burial practices have their origins in ancient ideas about purity. According to anthropologists, birth and death, and the blood that attends them, have a quality both of holiness and of impurity in the ancient Israelite religion that we learn of by reading the Torah (Hebrew Bible or Old Testament.) These ancient ideas survive in some present-day Jewish practices.

### **Preparing the body for burial (hevreh kadishah/taharah)**

For most Jews in North America who live in or near large cities, a Jewish funeral home or synagogue burial society (called a "hevra kedishah" in Hebrew) perform the preparations of the body for burial. These include watching the body between the time of death and the funeral ("shmirah") and ritual washing of the body ("taharah"). In some Jewish conceptions of life after death, the burial society accompanies the soul on the first part of its journey from the body.

Jewish law mandates prompt burial and respectful treatment of the body; ideally, the body should be buried within 24 hours of death. It is acceptable to delay burial only in [limited circumstances](#). These include observance of the Jewish Sabbath (Friday evening to Saturday evening), and allowing immediate family members to travel a long distance to be present for the funeral. If you are the family member making funeral arrangements for someone who has requested a Jewish funeral, consult a rabbi or a Jewish funeral home for advice if you have a question. It is their job to provide knowledgeable and compassionate help.

### **Jewish burial customs and causes of conflict**

It's very rare for Jewish funerals to have an open casket. In other cultures, viewing the body may be important--to give a sense of closure to mourners. In Jewish culture, public viewing of the dead person is too one-sided and seems like a violation of the dead person's modesty: we can look at the body but the person can't look back. In many ways, shmirah, the burial society vigil over the body, takes the place of a communal viewing of the person's body. In the standard Jewish burial, the body is not dressed in

clothing, but in a shroud, and the casket, ideally wood with no metal parts, is closed during the funeral and as the family and community members put it in the ground. The ideal is that the person's body will decompose. Traditional Jewish burial is consonant with the principles of "green burial." Some Jews believe that decomposition is the final step in the separation of the soul and the body.

### **Embalming and cremation**

For a variety of reasons, Jewish religious law prohibits embalming and cremation.

**Embalming** is the act of replacing all of the bodily fluids of a corpse with synthetic liquids that delay or arrest the body's decomposition. Embalming allows for open casket burial, and the ability to put the body on display for a long period of time. These practices go against Jewish cultural ideas of modest treatment of the body. One reason for the Jewish tradition of quick burial is that without embalming, the body will begin to deteriorate.

**Cremation** is the act of burning a corpse, under high heat, to remove all liquids and reduce the body to a small box of ashes and bone and tooth fragments. The rabbis who wrote the Talmud (the main collection of Jewish law) didn't like cremation because they believed that only a naturally decomposing body could be resurrected. Progressive Jews in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were interested in cremation as a more modern method of disposing of dead bodies, but knowledge of the Nazis' forced cremation of Jews during the Holocaust has made cremation unattractive to many Jews in the second half of the century.

Today, however, many people believe that cremation is more environmentally friendly than burial. Cremation is also less expensive in many places than a full burial, so deciding to cremate may fit better with Jewish ideas about keeping funerals as simple as possible, and accessibility of burial to all families, than a traditional burial does. Many traditional Jewish cemeteries will not provide space for cremains (the ashes of someone who has been cremated) to be buried. Some newer cemeteries will allow a family to bury cremains in the same casket or plot with a body. Some rabbis will officiate at funeral services before or after a cremation, even though cremation is not a traditional Jewish practice.

Even though embalming and cremation aren't Jewish practices, the Jewish relatives of an interfaith family may be just as likely to ask to be honored in these ways after they die as non-Jewish relatives are. It may be challenging to you if your religious practice or beliefs are different from the person making the last requests. It is a good idea to discuss what you want when you die with the people closest to you, and to be honest with each other about your feelings.

### **Who can be buried in this cemetery?**

Until recent decades Jews lived separately from their non-Jewish neighbors and had different burial practices. Therefore it was not a regular Jewish practice for Jews to bury non-Jews in Jewish cemeteries. Now that an increasing number of Jews are married to non-Jews, or have non-Jewish relatives, it has become more common for Jewish families to want to be buried together. Some Jewish cemeteries have worked to find a way that works with Jewish law and the sense of the community to bury people who aren't Jewish, so that families can be buried together. For more on this, please see *Planning Your Own Funeral or Someone Else's*, p. 10.

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

The funeral is the moment when the immediate relatives of the person who has died go from being in a state of transition to being mourners. Before the funeral begins, Jewish law says that mourners should tear their clothing. This is the vestige of a Biblical custom of mourners tearing their clothing when they learned or realized that someone close to them had died. This orchestrated act of destruction shows recognition that sometimes people who are in deep grief want to tear and break objects. Since Jews now perform this ritual under the supervision of the rabbi officiating at the funeral, many people fulfill this mitzvah by wearing a torn ribbon to symbolize torn clothing. Only the parents, children, siblings and spouses of the person who has died tear their clothing or wear something torn.

Sometimes the Jewish funeral service is conducted entirely at the graveside, and sometimes partially at the home of the mourners, a synagogue or funeral home before the mourners and their family and friends accompany the body to the cemetery. Usually the service includes chanting or recitation of the Hebrew prayer for the dead [El Malei Rachamim](#) ("God Full of Mercy"). At most funerals, the officiant and the assembled community read psalms, ancient poems from the Hebrew Bible that are also sacred to Christians. The funeral may be the first place that the mourners recite the [kaddish](#), a prayer in Aramaic that Jews recite in honor of people who have died, though it is not about death. Usually there is also at least one eulogy, delivered either by the presiding rabbi or by relatives or friends, or both.

Music, which is symbolic of joy in Jewish culture, is not traditional at Jewish funerals. The person who has died or the people who are mourning may want to hear an emotionally significant song or piece of music at the funeral service. It is important to make sure that all of the mourners and the rabbi officiating know about this in advance, to avoid friction at a difficult time.

Family and friends serve as pallbearers, because it's part of honoring the dead person. Jewish funerals also often include the actual physical filling of the grave. Depending on the family custom and the local regulations, there may be shovels at the graveside that people use to fill in the grave. This is a way to honor the person who has died, and a

respectful thing to do. In some Jewish funerals, the people at the graveside form two lines for the family members to walk between.

After the funeral, the close relatives go back to the house where they are going to be mourning. Either at the gates of the cemetery or at the door to the house of mourning, there should be an opportunity to ritually wash the hands. Some friends, family or community members go with the mourners to make sure that they eat when they get home. The custom is to put bread into the hands of the mourner. The first meal after a funeral traditionally includes round foods like eggs and lentils to symbolize the cyclic quality of life.

### **Mourning Customs**

Traditional Jewish mourning practices are based on a cultural sense of how mourners feel and what they need. They are intended to help mourners navigate a difficult period, and they may or may not match your feelings and needs. For example, in Jewish law and custom, a mourner is the parent, child, spouse or sibling of the person who dies. A person who survives an aunt or uncle, grandparent or close friend is not a mourner in the Jewish legal sense, even though their sense of loss and grief may be very great. The wider family and community does participate in the mourning process, and this can provide people in the extended circle of the person who has died with an opportunity to participate in comforting mourning rituals. But the traditional definition of mourner only includes the deceased's nuclear family.

Many people find that Jewish mourning practices are good for their psychological grief process, there may be some customs that would be difficult for you or cause dissent in your family. This overview is not meant to be prescriptive--only to sketch out the basic principles.

### **Mourning on a schedule**

The schedule of Jewish mourning is logical and familiar: for a week, a month, and a year after the burial, there are expected mourning activities, which grow less intense as time passes.

For a week after the burial, in the period called shiva, meaning seven, there is intense mourning, during which mourners do almost nothing, not even leaving the house. They may choose to follow some of the Jewish symbols of mourning: covering the mirrors, sitting on low stools or benches, not wearing leather shoes and not shaving. In traditional Jewish communities, people outside the family visit to provide the mourners with food, participate in prayer services in honor of the person who has died, and comfort the mourners in a prescribed fashion. Some families find it difficult to reconcile this intensive mourning practice with their jobs, and choose to sit shiva for a shorter period than seven days. Whether they sit for three days or until the Jewish Sabbath

(when mourning is forbidden) or the full seven days, the period of shiva is one in which mourners need the support of their families and friends.

### **The first week of mourning: Shiva**

If you are visiting a house during the week of mourning, you should be aware that this isn't a normal social call. The mourners aren't there to greet or entertain guests. Usually you don't ring the doorbell, or knock on the door, or even say hello to the mourner. The door is left open whenever there is anyone in the house.

Most Jewish mourners are too accustomed to providing hospitality to stop themselves from offering food to the people who have come to comfort them, but that is not their role. From the first ritual meal that the community sets before the mourners when they return from the burial, through the week of mourning, the community feeds the mourners. In synagogues, there is often a committee to coordinate cooking for a house of mourning, and sometimes friends arrange to send platters of food from a delicatessen instead of flowers. Food is traditional and flowers aren't. It's also traditional to give charity in memory of the person who has died.

If you aren't supposed to say hello and the mourner isn't supposed to jump up and offer you food, what do you when you visit a shiva house? The traditional words of comfort among Jews are "HaMakom y'nachem etkhem b'tokh sh'ar aveilei Tzion v'Yrushalayim"- "May God comfort you among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." Or you can say "I'm sorry," or just reach out to the person physically with a handshake or a hug if they want that. It is enough to just be there and listen. Whether the atmosphere is dark and quiet with the mourners on low stools and the mirrors covered, or whether it is busy, with many people visiting and big platters of food, take your cue from the mourners.

### **The first month of mourning: Sheloshim**

For a month after the burial, mourners who have gone back to their work and family lives avoid many normal pleasures, like getting married or attending events at which there will be a festive meal, like a wedding or a baby naming. Some have the custom not to shave or cut their hair for that time. Not all Jews keep these mourning customs strictly, but they exist as a way to acknowledge that a person in the early stages of mourning often doesn't feel like being at a party or having a new haircut. Sometimes mourners mark the end of sheloshim by sponsoring a study session in the name of the person who has died. It's also a good time to give money to charity.

### **The year of mourning: Saying kaddish**

During the 12 months after burial, observant Jewish mourners avoid certain pleasure-seeking activities, like concerts with live music. For eleven months after the burial, the children of someone who has died say [kaddish](#), a prayer sanctifying God's name, at services where there is a minyan, a quorum of 10 adult Jews. (In some synagogues, the

adults must be male.) Some Jews who don't ordinarily pray in a congregation will go to services in order to say [kaddish](#).

If you are a Jewish mourner who lives in a large or medium-sized Jewish community, you should be able to find a congregation that has daily morning services. In a place where there are fewer Jews, it may be more difficult to say kaddish everyday. Some people choose to go to synagogue on Shabbat once a week when that isn't their usual practice, or just say the prayer whenever they happen to have an opportunity. Even if you have not gone to synagogue regularly during the year or mourning, there is nothing wrong with saying kaddish on the one or two occasions a year you may happen to be at a synagogue.

For some people, the process of saying kaddish for a year is an opportunity to find comfort from other Jews who have been through the mourning process, since in many congregations, the people who make up the daily services do so because they benefitted from other people praying with them during the mourning year.

Though you should consult your own rabbi on this as on other issues of practice, most rabbis will say that Jewish children should say kaddish for non-Jewish parents. The only disagreement seems to be whether the Jewish child is permitted or obligated to do this. It may seem strange to use Jewish mourning practice to honor a person who was not Jewish, but the principle of honoring the dead person is the same.

### **Stone setting: an American Jewish custom**

At the end of the year of mourning, Jews in North America have the custom of a stone-setting or unveiling ceremony. This is an opportunity to remember the person who died and give a sense of closure to the year of mourning. Since there is no liturgy for this ritual, it's a good opportunity for people to share memories in whatever way makes sense to them--through set prayer, like El Malei Rachamim and kaddish, or traditional eulogy, or by sharing recorded music the person liked, or photos of them.

### **Yahrzeit/Yizkor**

In many cultures, there are ways of remembering dead people who were important to us. In the United States, for example, families go to visit relatives who died in the military on Memorial Day. In Ashkenazi Jewish culture, there is a custom of lighting a candle on the anniversary, or in Yiddish, the yahrzeit, of the person's death. Some families also light a memorial candle when they do holiday candle-lighting before holidays when there is a memorial service, called Yizkor. Some people continue to light yahrzeit candles for the rest of their lives.

Visits to the graves of family members are an important part of Jewish folk culture. Some have the custom of visiting at the Jewish New Year. Jews of Eastern European origin usually leave a small stone on the headstone of the grave rather than flowers.



Even after the year of mourning has ended, mourners continue to feel the loss of the person who has died, and Jewish cultural practices acknowledge this.

## **Planning Your Own Funeral or Someone Else's**

In most of the United States, Jewish community institutions are slowly changing their policies to be more welcoming toward interfaith families. Jewish funeral homes and burial associations have begun to recognize that they cannot fulfill their mission, which is to honor the dead and comfort mourners, without reaching out to interfaith families. In some larger Jewish communities, Jewish cemeteries have accommodated both interfaith families, and the traditional practice of excluding non-Jews from Jewish cemeteries, by setting aside a section for plots where interfaith couples can be buried side by side. Many Jewish cemeteries have not made such a provision, and will not allow the members of an interfaith couple to be buried side by side.

Some synagogues purchase plots for their congregants, so if you are a member of a synagogue, your first call in arranging your funerals may be to your rabbi to find out how the congregation is accommodating interfaith families. You can also check the websites of Jewish cemeteries in your area and phone Jewish funeral homes for information.

It is worthwhile for interfaith couples to discuss end of life issues and to ascertain what kinds of funeral arrangements they would like and what burial options are available to them. If you are not Jewish and your partner is, and you want to have rituals from your own religion at the time of death but also to be buried side-by-side, it may be a good option to be buried in a municipal cemetery. The Jewish partner can still be buried with Jewish ritual, as the individual grave of a Jew is still considered consecrated ground. Consult a rabbi to get more expert advice on this issue.

The principles that govern how Jews deal with death can sometimes be in competition. Religious Jews try to honor the divine image in the human being by treating the dead person's body with respect. Jews also want to fulfill the commandment to comfort mourners. Mourners, whether Jewish or not, want to honor the wishes of people who are close to them about death and burial, but our values may be in conflict. What if a Jewish parent wants a Jewish child to cremate him? Or if the child is a secular humanist and the parent is a religious Christian, or the child is Jewish and the parent is an atheist, then what should the funeral look like?

The goal is always to communicate and reach compromises between the desires of the dying or dead person and those of the people who will be mourning them. In this way we do our best to make sure that the end of life is a meaningful experience of compassion and respect.

## **Speaking to Your Children about Death**

Your mother-in-law has died and your elementary school aged children are struggling. What should you tell them that that Jews believe about death?

If you were raised as a Christian, it may surprise you to know that most Jews do not learn about the official Jewish view of the afterlife. Jews have a rich tradition of beliefs about what happens to a person after he or she dies, but they aren't beliefs that easily fit together. There is a concept in Judaism of the soul leaving the body to reside in Gan Eden, or paradise. At the same time, rabbis believed in resurrection of the dead. Medieval Jewish mystics included in the Jewish mystical tradition, the kabbalah, an idea of reincarnation, called gilgul. Another Jewish way of thinking about life after death is the World to Come, which is either the world as it is for the soul after death, or the world of the future messianic era, when the dead will be resurrected, or both.

If these beliefs seem difficult to reconcile with one another, it may be because Jews do not concentrate on teaching about the afterlife. As a minority in Christian culture, Jews have staked out a place as the religion of the here-and-now, leaving discussions of afterlife beliefs to scholars and mystics. Jews have believed, and many continue to believe, that people's souls persist after their bodies die, and that good deeds in this world will be rewarded in the world to come. Jewish teachings about ethics, morality, God and family, and even Jewish teachings about death, are not dependent on any one doctrine about what happens to people after they die.

For children, the biggest challenge may be in understanding what it means that someone has died and isn't going to come back. Children who are in mourning need the same kind of comfort as adults, even though they aren't in a position to do all the things adults do. Children can also participate in comforting mourners in their family and community, which is an important Jewish thing to do even if the mourners are not Jewish. If you are sending food to a Jewish house of mourning, or flowers to a non-Jewish relative in mourning, visiting someone to comfort them or if you are just remembering the person who died, children can be involved in [an age-appropriate way](#).

## Recommended Online Resources

Anita Diamant, [Mourning Non-Jewish Loved Ones](#) on [MyJewishLearning.com](#), excerpted from *Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead, and Mourn as a Jew* (Schocken Books, 1999).  
[http://www.myjewishlearning.com/lifecycle/Death/Issues\\_in\\_Death/Can\\_Convert\\_Kaddish.htm](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/lifecycle/Death/Issues_in_Death/Can_Convert_Kaddish.htm)

Joshua Elkin, [A Time to Grieve, A Time to Teach Teaching Children about Death and Dying: A Challenge to Parents and Educators](#).  
<http://www.uscj.org/publicaffairs/review/time.htm>

Earl Grollman, [Helping Children of Different Ages Cope With a Death](#) on [MyJewishLearning.com](#).  
[http://www.myjewishlearning.com/lifecycle/Death/Issues\\_in\\_Death/HelpingKidsCope.htm](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/lifecycle/Death/Issues_in_Death/HelpingKidsCope.htm)

Jewish Women's Network, [Bereavement Booklet for Jewish Women](#). From a Jewish feminist organization in Great Britain.  
[http://www.jwn.org.uk/docs/Bereavment\\_files/JWNBereavebooklet2002.htm](http://www.jwn.org.uk/docs/Bereavment_files/JWNBereavebooklet2002.htm)

Maurice Lamm, [The Jewish Way In Death and Mourning](#) on [www.chabad.org](#). Reprinted by permission from Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, (Jonathan David, 2000.) A clear guide to Orthodox Jewish practice.  
[http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/281541/jewish/The-Jewish-Way-in-Death-and-Mourning.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/281541/jewish/The-Jewish-Way-in-Death-and-Mourning.htm)

Zalman Schacter Shalomi, [Reb Zalman on the Chevre Kaddisha](#).  
<http://www.tbzbrookline.org/life/joys.php?id=6019&page=6019>

Harold Schulweis, [Questions On Dying, Death, The Funeral And Weddings](#). From the website of [Valley Beth Shalom](#). Includes advice about how to speak with children.  
<http://www.vbs.org/religious/shailos.htm>

## Books

Anne Brenner, *Mourning & Mitzvah: A Guided Journal for Walking the Mourner's Path Through Grief to Healing*. (Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993).

Anita Diamant, *Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead, and Mourn As a Jew*. (Schocken Books, 1999).

Simcha Paull Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*. (Jason Aronson, 1994).