

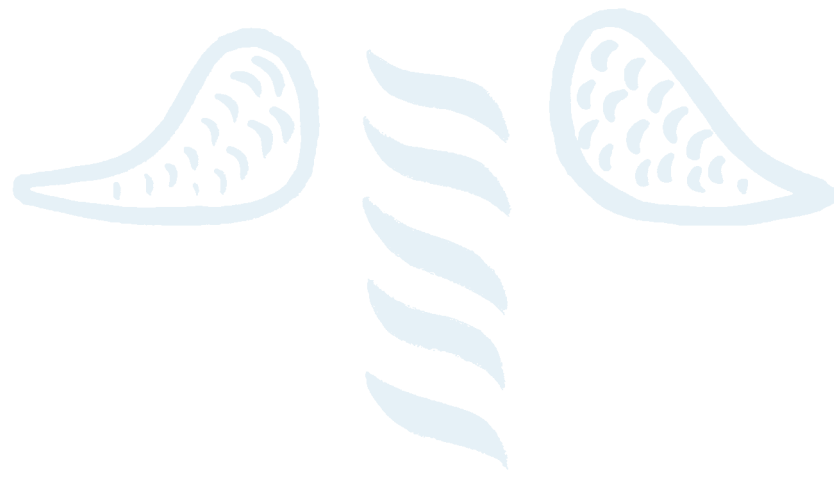


## Park Avenue Synagogue *Guide to Mourning Practices*



**All Jews do not mourn alike.** Some people may choose to observe the rites and customs of mourning very meticulously as a form of spiritual support during their time of grief, while others may observe only some of these customs and be more relaxed and creative in their practices. This brochure will briefly touch on a wide range of customs to provide as broad a background as possible for our members. Please be sure to consult with a member of our clergy for specific questions you may have, whether related to the matters described in this guide or other matters related to your loss.

## Park Avenue Synagogue *Guide to Mourning Practices*



### Who is a mourner?

We mourn for a father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister (including half-brother and half-sister), husband or wife. We are also permitted to observe the mourning rites for anyone, not only for the relatives listed above.

### Between death and burial—respect for the dead—shrouds and casket

During the period between death and burial, the mourner is known as an *onen*. The most important duty of an *onen* is to arrange for the funeral and the burial. One does not say *kaddish* before the funeral.

Jewish tradition calls for the dead to be buried as soon as possible, usually within twenty-four hours after death. However, a delay is permitted when needed to obtain shrouds or a proper casket, or for the sake of honoring the dead by waiting for relatives and friends who must travel great distances. In addition, the funeral must be delayed if Shabbat or a Festival occurs immediately following the death.

Judaism teaches that human life is sacred. The human body deserves respect, even after the breath of life has left it. Respect for the dead is a fundamental principle governing Jewish practice. One expression of this respect is the ritual washing of the dead body which is then dressed in shrouds. This function is performed by members of the *hevrah kadishah*, a group devoted to the ritual burial of the dead. The funeral home typically handles this function, as well as those described immediately below.

The body of the deceased is often clothed in plain white linen, cotton, or muslin shrouds. The reason for this practice is the feeling that all Jews should be buried in the same type of inexpensive garments. This practice also emphasizes that all people,

### Between death and burial—respect for the dead—shrouds and casket—continued

rich and poor alike, are equal before God. The same principle is reflected in the practice of using a plain, inexpensive wooden casket. A man is customarily buried in a *tallit* that he used during his life, after one of the fringes has been cut to make it ritually unfit. Objects of value for the living are not to be buried with the dead.

It is Jewish tradition to have a closed casket, often covered with an appropriate cloth. It is also considered inappropriate to apply cosmetics to the deceased or to bury the deceased in anything other than shrouds.

A dead body is not to be left alone before the funeral, another way of showing respect for the dead. It is appropriate for mourners and other members of the family and friends to be with the body. In order to maintain a constant watch, arrangements may be made for other individuals (*shomrim*, watchers) to be with the body day and night. Those who are with the body should spend their time chanting and reading from the Book of Psalms. This function is also performed by the *hevrah kadishah*.

### Kriah

*Kriah*, a tear made in the mourner's clothing or on a ribbon attached to the clothing, is an external symbol of inner grief and mourning, a symbolic representation of a broken heart. *Kriah* is usually made immediately preceding the start of the funeral service. It is done for the mourner while the mourner is standing, signifying that we should confront sorrow directly. A blessing is recited by the mourner just before *kriah*: *Baruch attah Adonai eloheinu melech ha'olam, dayan haemet* ("Praised are You, Lord our God, sovereign of the universe, the true judge"). Like the mourner's *kaddish*, this blessing is a reaffirmation of faith, and of the value of life, made at a time of intense sorrow and pain. A torn garment (or ribbon) is worn throughout the period of *shivah*, but not on Shabbat.

### The Funeral and Burial

Both the funeral and burial services are typically brief. In addition to certain prayers and biblical readings, it is appropriate for a member of the clergy to recite a eulogy for the loved one. Family members may also do so.

At the gravesite, relatives and friends will drop several spadefuls of earth on the lowered casket, another act of involvement reflecting their constant concern for one whom they loved (some recite *kaddish* after the casket is covered with earth; others wait until the grave is entirely filled). After reciting *kaddish*, it is customary for the mourners to walk between two lines formed by the others present, who say *Hamakom y'nachem etchem b'toch sh'ar aveilei tzion v'yirushalayim* ("May the Almighty comfort you with all the other mourners of Zion and Jerusalem").

### Return from the Cemetery

It is customary to rinse the hands before entering the home upon returning from the cemetery, using a pitcher filled with water left outside the door for that purpose. A candle (furnished by the funeral home), which burns continuously for seven days, is lit upon returning home from the cemetery.

A mourner's first meal after returning from the cemetery is provided by friends and neighbors, who thus express their concern in a practical way. The meal customarily includes round objects such as hard-boiled eggs or lentils symbolizing fate and the wheel of life for some, symbolizing life and hope for others. Neither wine nor meat is normally served at this meal. Subsequent *shivah* meals may be either meat or dairy.

### The Mourner's Kaddish

A mourner first recites *kaddish* at the cemetery after burial. Although the *kaddish* is generally thought of as a prayer for the dead, it is essentially an affirmation of life and faith. It confronts death with life. Reciting the mourner's *kaddish* is an act of looking to the future and all of life with faith and hope, in the presence of grief and despair.

*Kaddish* is an Aramaic word meaning holy. Recitation of *kaddish* is an act of hallowing and praising God and God's name. In Jewish tradition, such an act must take place in public assembly, which is defined as at least a quorum of ten Jewish adults (a minyan). Thus the *kaddish*, in any variation, is recited only in the presence of a minyan. Mourner's *kaddish* is recited for eleven months for a parent, for other relatives it is recited for thirty days.

### Shivah

We sit *shivah* for a father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister (including half-brother and half-sister), husband or wife. *Shivah* means seven, the number of days in the stage of mourning which begins after burial. While sitting *shivah*, in recognition of the shock of the loss of the loved one, the mourners traditionally abstain from business and professional activities, cutting hair and shaving. The period of *shivah* is intentionally set aside from normal, everyday life in order to enable mourners to gather their thoughts, to focus on memories of the deceased, and to be comforted by members of the community. The purpose of *shivah* is to give voice to sadness, not to suppress it.

Traditionally, mourners do not wear leather shoes, belts or other leather items and sit on low stools or chairs during *shivah* (except while eating). This practice is symbolic of the reality of being "brought low" by grief. Park Avenue Synagogue will send low chairs and prayer books to the house of mourning. For each day of the *shivah*, a member of the clergy will make him- or herself available to lead a minyan in the mourner's house, thereby allowing the mourners to recite *kaddish* in their own home. The mourner should

### *Shivah—continued*

be seated when people offer their condolences. Some people cover mirrors (as symbols of vanity) or turn them to the wall in a house of mourning.

The day of the burial counts as the first day of *shivah*. *Shivah* ends on the morning of the seventh day, after one hour. Shabbat is included in counting the seven days, although on Shabbat no outward signs of mourning apply. The mourners should wear regular shoes, sit on regular chairs, and change into clothing that bears no signs of mourning. It is also appropriate for them to attend synagogue services on Shabbat. On Friday (unless it is the seventh day of *shivah*) or on the day before a Festival, *shivah* is observed until two and one half hours before sunset.

For the last day of *shivah*, the mourners should take a short walk together, symbolizing their return to life's normal routine.

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### **Conduct during the period of mourning**

When mourning a parent, one mourns for twelve months after the day of death, which is one month longer than the period of saying *kaddish*. When mourning a relative other than a parent, one mourns for a period of 30 days, which is called *shloshim* ("thirty"). That period ends on the morning of the thirtieth day after the funeral. During the mourning period, whether thirty days or twelve months, traditionally a mourner does not participate in general festivities and avoids public places of entertainment if the mourner chooses to mourn in this way. A good indicator of whether an event should be avoided because it is of a festive nature, or purely for entertainment, is whether one will be listening to music at the event. Examples of parties that a mourner does not attend include those connected with a *bar* or *bat mitzvah*, *brit milah*, *pidyon haben*, or wedding, though he or she may attend the ceremonies that precede the party.

### **Unveiling**

It is customary to place a tombstone on a grave, dedicating it in a brief ceremony, called an "unveiling." That ceremony may take place at any time after the period of *shivah*, although it typically occurs within eleven months after the death.

### **Yahrzeit**

*Yahrzeit* is observed on each anniversary of the day of death according to the Hebrew calendar. A memorial, *yahrzeit* candle should burn in the home during the twenty-four hour period of *yahrzeit*, sunset to sunset, starting on the evening preceding the day. When the *yahrzeit* coincides with Shabbat or a Festival, the *yahrzeit* candle should be lit before the candle-lighting for the day.

### *Yahrzeit—continued*

Mourner's *kaddish* is recited at all services on the *yahrzeit*, from evening services on the night before through afternoon services on the day itself. On Shabbat before the *yahrzeit* one may receive an aliyah at synagogue services.

### **Yizkor**

*Yizkor* ("May God remember") services in memory of the dead are held on Yom Kippur, the eighth day of Sukkot, the last day of Pesach and the second day of Shavuot. It is traditionally a time for those who have lost a loved one to recite memorial prayers and *kaddish*.

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Should you wish to read further on any subjects related to mourning, the sources for this brochure are Jules Harlow, *The Bond of Life (a Book for Mourners)*, Rabbinic Assembly 2nd ed. 1983, which is the Siddur that the synagogue sends to your house for the duration of your observation of *Shivah*, and Isaac Klein, *Jewish Practice*, Ktav Publishing House, 2nd ed. 1992. In addition, a more comprehensive listing of rules, from the orthodox perspective, can be found in Michael Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, Jonathan David Publishers, 1969.



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