

A GUIDE TO  
*Jewish*  
FUNERAL PRACTICES

At the time  
when one  
should be  
joyous,  
be joyous.  
When  
it is time  
to mourn,  
mourn.

—*Genesis Rabba 27:7*

This booklet has been made possible through the generosity of the Chizuk Amuno Foundation, Inc.

Each generation honors the memory of its loved ones by perpetuating their values into the future. As the heirs to Chizuk Amuno Congregation, it is our responsibility to support the educational and programmatic visions of our synagogue in gratitude for what those who lived before us have achieved. A gift to the Foundation ensures that Chizuk Amuno, a source of strength for each of us, remains strong for the generations who follow.

Due to the vision of the congregation's leaders, and the generosity of synagogue members through the years, Chizuk Amuno is fortunate to operate a charitable foundation dedicated to perpetuating our loved ones' values and our Jewish heritage.

You may meaningfully honor the memory of your loved ones by calling the Development Office at 410/486-6400 for additional information about the Chizuk Amuno Foundation and how you can participate with us.

# *A Guide to Jewish Funeral Practices*

Dear Friends,

We can never be ready for the death of a loved one, but we can be prepared. These materials are provided as a resource to help you cope with the emotions, arrangements, and religious observances you will need some day. They reflect the ethics of Judaism as well as the customs and sensitivities of our congregation.

First presented by Rabbi Joel Zaiman and Rabbi Richard Camras along with Barbara Leibowitz Lichter, Robert Wolf, Bernard Fish, and Ann Brodie, we are pleased to re-issue this guide to make information about the funeral and mourning practices of Jewish tradition easily accessible to you.

We hope that you will find value in these pages and comfort in the supportive embrace of our Jewish community. Please do call upon us and your synagogue for answers to any personal questions you may have or for discussion about individual beliefs, concerns, or preparations. In death, as in life, Jewish values uphold the dignity of every person and the loving respect each individual merits. These ideals guide our care for you and the assistance we will try to provide.

תַּמְקוֹם יְנַחֵם אֶתְכֶם בְּתוֹךְ שְׂאֵר אֲבֵלֵי צִיּוֹן וִירוּשָׁלַיִם.

*“HaMakom y’nahem etkhem b’tokh sh’ar a’ve-lei Tziyon v’Yerushalayim.*

The traditional Jewish words of consolation are:

May God comfort you among all the mourners of our people  
in Zion and Jerusalem.”

The metaphor for God in this statement is “the Place, *HaMakom*.” We dedicate this guide with the prayer that our synagogue community may be for you a place of embrace, comfort, and God’s presence in your time of need.

*Shalom,*



Ronald J. Shulman  
Rabbi



Deborah Wechsler  
Rabbi

*When Death  
Occurs*

Contact a funeral home.

- Sol Levinson and Brothers may be reached at 410/653-8900. They will coordinate funeral arrangements with the clergy, the Synagogue staff, and the cemetery. However, do not set a time for the funeral without first consulting the Rabbi.
- The funeral home will arrange the funeral even if it is to take place out of town. They will also make the necessary arrangements in the event the body needs to be returned to Baltimore.

You may call the Rabbi and the *Hazzan* personally. The funeral home will also be in touch with them.

If you do not have a burial plot, the funeral director can arrange for you to purchase one.

- Ideally, arrangements should be made in advance with the director of Chizuk Amuno's Arlington Cemetery who is available to give assistance and can be reached at the Synagogue office, 410/486-6400.

*Organ  
Donations*

Organ transplants have become an accepted way to save lives and donations alleviate human suffering. There is a consensus among Conservative Jews that organ transplants are permissible according to Jewish law and are meritorious acts of *hesed*, true loving kindness. Jewish burial tradition requires simplicity in all funeral arrangements.

## *Preparations for Burial*

- The casket should be a simple wooden coffin, a symbol that rich and poor alike are equal before God.
- Arlington Cemetery requires vaults or liners for all burials.
- It is customary that the deceased be buried in a shroud or *takbrikhim*, a simple white linen garment supplied by the funeral home.

The deceased person is always treated with the utmost respect and sanctity.

- The deceased should never be left unattended. Family members may act as *shomrim*, or the funeral home can appoint a *shomer*, someone to watch over the deceased until the burial is completed.
- Jewish law dictates that a ritual cleansing, *tahara*, be performed. The funeral home will make the arrangements.
- Cremation is forbidden; it is seen as a desecration of the body.
- Embalming and autopsies are usually forbidden as they are seen as desecrations of the body. However, there are certain circumstances when Jewish Law permits autopsies. Please contact the Rabbi for additional information.

## *The Funeral*

Out of respect for the deceased, the funeral should take place as soon as possible after death. However, funerals may not take place on the Sabbath, on the first, second and last days of festivals, nor on the High Holy Days.

- The funeral service may be conducted at a funeral chapel or at the grave site.
- The service, which is simple and dignified, may include psalms, inspirational readings, and a eulogy highlighting the qualities of the deceased. Flowers, a symbol of growing life, are not customary at Jewish funerals.
- It is a *mitzvah* to be a pallbearer. Generally six to eight pallbearers are appointed to lift the coffin into the hearse and to carry it to the grave. Honorary pallbearers may also be assigned.

*Kriah*, the ritual tearing of a garment, is observed by the immediate relatives of the deceased: father, mother, brother, sister, son, daughter and spouse. As a traditional expression of grief and anguish, a symbolic tear is made in an article of the mourner's clothing, such as a tie, a vest, a jacket or a dress. Today, the prevailing custom is for the mourner to pin a black ribbon to his or her garment and tear the ribbon.

- The tear should be worn visibly during *shivah*. You do not need to wear the ribbon openly after *shivah*, and the ribbon or torn clothing is never worn on *Shabbat* or holidays.

- Those in mourning for parents wear the ribbon on the left or make a tear on the left side of the garment, which is close to the heart. The ribbon or tear should be plainly visible.
- Those in mourning of all other relatives wear the ribbon on the right or make a tear on the right side of the garment.

*The Ritual at  
the Cemetery*

Jewish law requires the dead to be buried in the earth. Traditionally, the casket is lowered into the ground and completely covered with earth before the mourners leave the cemetery. Today some families continue this practice while others choose to place some earth on the coffin as a symbolic gesture and a way of paying final respects to the deceased.

The burial service consists of recitation of appropriate psalms and prayers and concludes with the recitation of the *Kaddish*.

There is no prohibition against pregnant women attending a funeral or being present at the cemetery.

*Children at  
the Funeral*

Instinctively, we want to protect our children from pain and suffering. However, since it is important that children recognize that death is a part of life, families are encouraged to include children in all parts of the funeral services and mourning rites. Children over the age of six can usually understand and gain insight from the funeral and burial, but if children do not wish to attend, they should not be forced to do so.

By the same token, a child who wishes to go should not be deprived of the opportunity.

## Shivah

The immediate relatives should sit *shivah* together in one place, traditionally the home of the deceased. *Shivah* begins immediately after internment and ends on the seventh day after the morning services. *Shabbat* is included in the seven days of the *shivah* period; however, public mourning is suspended on *Shabbat*. If *Pesah*, *Shavuot*, or *Sukkot* falls during the *shivah* period, *shivah* ends when the holiday begins since the spirit of joy that comes with a festival is not consistent with the sadness of bereavement. If burial falls during the intermediate days of a festival, *shivah* begins at sundown on the last day of the holiday.

Customs of *shivah*:

- For ritual purification, towels and a bowl of water are set out in front of the house of mourning so that those who were at the cemetery can wash their hands before entering the house. No prayer is said nor is there a particular procedure for the washing.
- A memorial candle is kept lit in the *shivah* house during all seven days. No prayer is recited.
- It is customary to cover the mirrors in the *shivah* house. The reasons vary, but primarily we are not to be concerned with issues of vanity during *shivah*.
- Traditionally, during the *shivah* period, mourners sit on low stools to signify their lack of concern for personal comfort and refrain from wearing leather to signify their disregard for luxury.

- The funeral home can provide chairs and coat racks and will deliver them to the house of mourning.

*Seudat Havra'ah*, the first meal upon returning from the cemetery, is usually provided by friends and neighbors of the bereaved.

- Traditionally, eggs and other round foods symbolizing the eternal cycle of life are eaten at the meal of consolation. It is also customary for friends and relatives to take care of all meal arrangements during the week of *shivah*.

Memorial Services are held mornings and evenings at the *shivah* house.

- Chizuk Amuno will provide families a leader for all of the prayer services. However, the synagogue is unable to provide a full *minyan* of ten people.

***Guidelines  
for Mourners  
During the  
Shivah Period***

The *shivah* period is set aside as time for you and your family to grieve and accept condolences.

- As a mourner, you refrain from doing business or experiencing any kind of entertainment or pleasure. Let visitors know how you are feeling and what you need from them.
- Do not apologize for being upset or crying and do not be concerned that you may upset others by expressing your feelings. *Shivah* is the time to reminisce and talk about the deceased.
- Remember, visitors are there for you. Do not see yourself as host or hostess. It is not necessary to rise and greet visitors when they come to pay their respects.

*Guidelines  
for Visitors  
to a House  
of Mourning*

The purpose of a *shivah* call is to let the bereaved know that they are not alone in their suffering and sorrow. You are there to lend emotional support and to speak about their loved one.

- The bereaved have the difficult task of facing death squarely and learning to accept their loss. When making a *shivah* call visitors should not attempt to divert the mourners from their grief in an attempt to help them forget. The bereaved want to remember, and so it is helpful if you talk about the deceased and the death.
- If the mourner rises to extend greeting to you, you may return them, but you should not initiate such greetings.
- It is perfectly acceptable for there to be moments of silence during a *shivah* visit. Custom tells us to remain silent and allow the mourner to speak first. Lending a sympathetic ear is more important than making small talk.
- Upon leaving a house of mourning it is traditional to recite the blessing, "*HaMakom y'na'hem etkhem b'tokh sh'ar a've-lei Tziyon v'Yerushalayim*. May God comfort you among all the mourners of our people in Zion and Jerusalem." The metaphor for God in this statement is "the Place, *HaMakom*."

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בְּתוֹךְ שְׂאֵר אַבְלֵי צִיּוֹן וִירוּשָׁלַיִם.

## *The Rituals of Mourning*

*Sheloshim* is the thirty-day period of mourning for relatives other than children of the deceased. For sons and daughters of the deceased, the period extends to 12 months from the day of internment. Please consult one of the rabbis regarding what is permitted and prohibited during *sheloshim* and the 12 months following.

It is optional for mourners other than sons and daughters to recite *Kaddish* for eleven months. However, many do so because they find that reciting the *kaddish* brings comfort and consolation and reaffirms their faith in God.

## *Memorials*

*Yahrzeit* is the anniversary of the death of the deceased.

- At sundown on the night of *yahrzeit*, a candle is lit in the home to burn for 24 hours in memory of the deceased. No blessing is recited when lighting a *yahrzeit* candle. Should *yahrzeit* fall on *yom tov* or *Shabbat*, the *yahrzeit* candle is lit before the *Shabbat* or *yom tov* candles.
- *Kaddish* is recited at services in the synagogue on the evening of the *yahrzeit* and again at morning and afternoon services the following day. The *El Malei Rahamim* may be recited in memory of the deceased.
- If the family has dedicated a perpetual memorial, a plaque with the name of the deceased will be displayed in the synagogue and the name of the deceased will be read during services and published in the synagogue bulletin.

## *Yizkor*

*Yizkor* is the memorial service honoring the deceased. It is recited beginning with the very first service following the burial and four times a year thereafter: on *Yom Kippur*, on *Shemini Atzeret* (the eighth day of *Sukkot*), on the eighth day of *Pesah*, and on the second day of *Shavuot*.

## *The Unveiling*

The unveiling is the formal dedication of the headstone. It is customary for the unveiling to take place 12 months after the funeral as a way to mark the end of the formal mourning period. However, it may take place any time after *sheloshim*.

- Jewish law requires that a grave be marked, but the type of marking and the headstone are not specified.
- Inscriptions usually include the name of the deceased in Hebrew and/or English as well as the date of birth and the date of death. Many people add the Hebrew letters, ה' נ' צ' ב' ה', *Taf, Nun, Tzadik, Bet, Hey*, which is an abbreviation for the phrase, *T'hey Nishmato/ah Tzrura B'tzror Hehayim*, "May (Name of deceased's) soul be bound up in the bond of life."
- If you are not sure of the Hebrew spelling of the name, you can send a copy of the engraver's stencil to the Rabbi at the synagogue for verification. The monument company will provide you with a copy of the stencil.
- Make sure that a monument and covering are in place before setting a date for the unveiling.

## *Visiting the Cemetery*

- Traditionally, the ceremony includes a recitation of a few psalms, the chanting of the *El Malei Rahamim* and the recitation of The Mourners *Kaddish*.
- It is not necessary for the Rabbi or the *Hazzan* to officiate at the unveiling although they are available to do so.

Although Jewish law does not dictate when one must visit the grave of the deceased, there are times when it is traditional and comforting to do so: on *yahrzeit*, on Fast Days, and before the High Holy Days.

Judaism discourages excessive grave visitation. Visits to the grave should not be made on the middle days of *Pesah* or *Sukkot* (*Hol HaMoed*), nor on *Hanukkah*.

*Additional  
Reading*

The following is a list of helpful books to use as a guide and to consult for further help and explanation.

- *A Time to Mourn, a Time to Comfort*,  
Dr. Ron Wolfson
- *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*, Isaac Klein
- *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*,  
Maurice Lamm
- *Mourning and Mitzvah, A Guided Journal for Walking  
the Mourner's Path Through Grief to Healing*,  
Anne Brener
- *Jewish Reflections on Death*,  
Jack Riemer
- *Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the  
Dead, and Mourn As a Jew*,  
Anita Diamant
- *Tears of Sorrow, Seeds of Hope*,  
Nina Beth Cardin
- *Grief in Our Seasons: A Mourner's Kaddish Companion*,  
Kerry M. Olitzky



Chizuk Amuno  
CONGREGATION  
ק"ק חזוק אמונה

Chizuk Amuno Congregation  
8100 Stevenson Road • Baltimore, Maryland 21208  
410 / 486-6400