



Jewish Death and Mourning Customs

To live is to die. To love is to know the pain of losing those we love. Nothing can truly prepare us for death; the purpose of this guide is to give an overview of the Jewish laws and customs as they are practiced at Beacon Hebrew Alliance; if you have any questions about anything in this guide, please be in touch with Rabbi Brent Spodek. This document was revised on May 24, 2016.

From Death to Burial

The Jewish tradition emphasizes burying the deceased as soon as possible¹ after death. Funerals can be at the graveside or at a funeral home. Most funeral homes are familiar with Jewish mourning rituals; BHA has a long standing relationship with Libby's Funeral Home in Beacon (845.831.0179).

Burial in the BHA cemetery on [Osbourne Hill Road in Fishkill](#) is open to members of the synagogue. Fees are as follows:

- Purchase of Plot \$2500
- Plot Reservation \$500
- Fee for Grave Opening \$1000
- One time Maintenance Charge \$800

The plot fee is reduced \$500 a year for each of the first five years of members to a minimum of \$500. If neither the deceased nor their immediate relative is a member of BHA, the fee is \$2500 + membership dues for that year. No members of BHA are turned away from our cemetery for financial reasons. For more details regarding cemetery plots, please be in touch with Jeff Gross at 845.896.3945.

If you would like for Rabbi Spodek or Cantor Gersh to officiate at the funeral, please be in touch with Rabbi Spodek (845.831.2012 x1) and *then* Libby's or a different funeral home of your choosing to set the time for the funeral. There is no formal fee for Rabbi Spodek or Cantor Gersh to officiate at a funeral for a member of BHA or their immediate family; however it is customary to make a voluntary contribution of \$1000 to the [Clergy Discretionary Fund](#) at BHA. Fees for non-member funerals are \$1000; non-members with further questions should speak directly with Rabbi Spodek or Cantor Gersh.

While the preference is for burial to be as soon as possible, there are circumstances in which a delay is appropriate, particularly if close family members need to make travel arrangements. A delay of more than three days is very unusual and should be avoided.

Once the date and time have been set, you should then talk with Rabbi Spodek or Cantor Gersh about the eulogy and who should speak at the funeral. In general, the practice at BHA is for eulogies to be given by people who actually knew the deceased, which is not always our clergy. Any feelings you have about who should or should not speak at the funeral should be communicated clearly to our clergy. When you speak with them, it will be useful to have the following information about your loved one: Their date and place of birth, cause of death, occupation, college degrees, membership in organizations, military service or noteworthy achievements and a list of survivors in the immediate family.

¹ See Deuteronomy 21:23



When a member of our synagogue is in mourning, the general practice at BHA is to send an email to the congregation announcing the death and sharing funeral and *shiva* information as appropriate. If you would like to do something other than that, please be sure to let Rabbi Spodek know.

Jewish burial and mourning practices are deliberately simple.² By very strong and ancient tradition, Jews are buried in simple, unadorned pine wood caskets. Occasionally, members are honored by having *geniza*, or holy, documents buried with them. If you would like for your loved one to be honored in this way, please let our clergy know.

Other equally ancient and strong tradition is called *tahara*, or purity, in which the deceased is lovingly washed and prepared for burial by members of the *chevra kadisha*, or Holy Society and *shomrim*, or guarding, in which members of the community keep vigil over the deceased until burial. If you intend to follow this important tradition, please let our clergy know, so arrangements can be made. The Jewish tradition does not support embalming or cremating the dead; rather, we return to the earth from which we came.

If you have suffered a miscarriage or other pregnancy loss, the clergy of BHA are available to support you in honoring this loss via counseling, ritual, prayer, or burial and connecting you to additional resources.

Funeral & Burial

Funeral

A few minutes before the community formally gathers for the funeral, our clergy will gather the family together for *kriah*, which is the tearing of a garment or ribbon, as a symbol of grief and mourning. Mourners stand, and before the cut is made, say the words of Job, "The Lord has given and the Lord has taken, blessed be the Name of the Lord."

The funeral service itself is brief, and the *hesped*, or eulogy, is at the center. The funeral generally concludes with *El maleh rahamim*, which expresses our hope for the immortal soul of the departed.

Burial

At the graveside, the service consists of recitation of *tziduk ha-din*, a prayer which expresses our acceptance of the unvarying flow of life towards death, followed by the recitation of *kaddish* and *el maleh rachamim*.

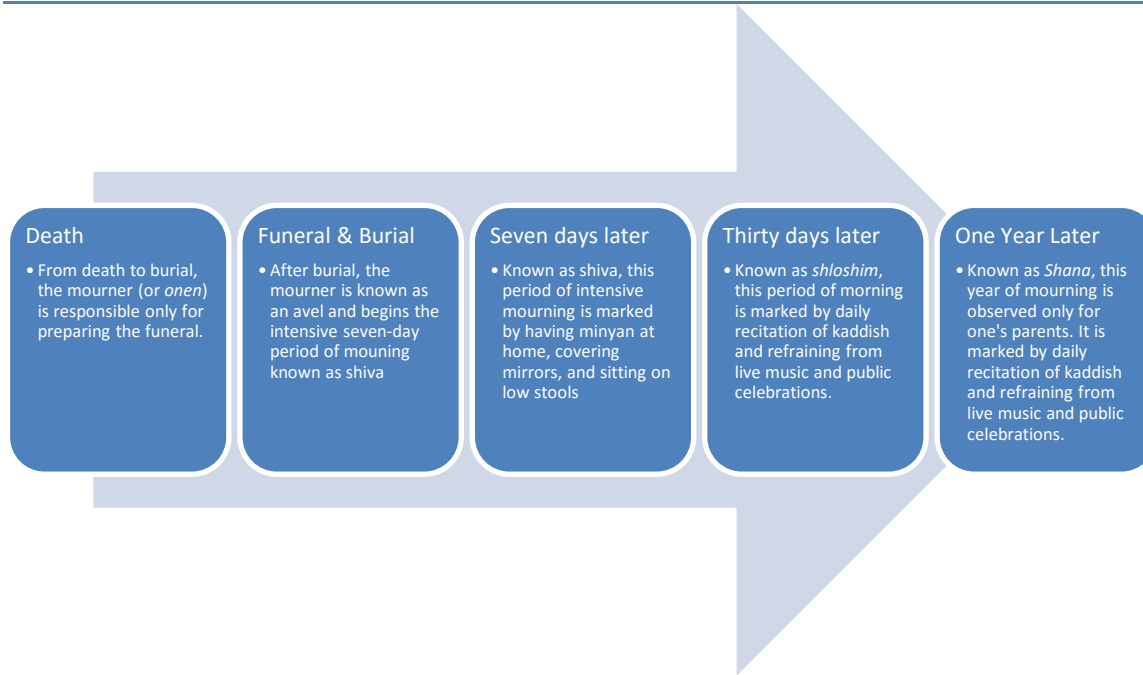
After the *aron* is fully lowered into the ground, friends and loved ones shovel earth into the grave to begin the burial. The mourners are not obliged to complete the burial and neither is there any rush. All who wish to bury the deceased should be given the chance to do so. The first shovelful of dirt is done with the back of the shovel to indicate that this is not a chore, but an act of kindness. If there are young children who should take part in this act of kindness, a small pail of dirt and a spade can be made available.

After the burial, everyone *other* than the mourners form two lines to let the mourners pass between them. As the mourners pass through those lines, their friends and family say these traditional words of comfort to them:

המקום ינחם אתכם בתוך שאר אבלי ציון וירושלים
Ha-makom yinakhem et-khem betokh she-ar aveilei tziyon veyerushalayim,
May The Ever-present One comfort you among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.

² For more on simplicity in burial practices, see Moed Katan 27a-b regarding caskets and Ketubot 8b regarding clothing.

The path of the mourner



The period of time between death and burial is called *anninut* and the bereaved is called an *onen*. The prime responsibility of the *onen* is to arrange the funeral. During this time, an *onen* is considered exempt from all other obligations, religious and otherwise. Only relatives or very close friends should visit during this time, primarily to help make arrangements for the funeral and *shiva*. After the burial, a mourner is known as an *avel*. One is a mourner of obligation for parents, children, siblings or spouse. However, anyone is allowed to observe the mourning rites.

The length of the formal mourning period varies with the relationship between the mourner and the person who has passed. For everyone other than one's parents, *avelut*, the mourning period, ends with *shloshim*, thirty days after the funeral. For parents, the mourning period lasts a full Hebrew year.

Sometimes, a Jew is mourning for a non-Jew they loved; other times, a non-Jew is mourning a Jew that they loved. Two principles are relevant to these situations; one is *kavod ha-met*, or respecting the dignity of the deceased; the other is *lo ha metim ye-hallel Yah*; the deceased do not praise Yah.

The rites and traditions of mourning are for the living, not the deceased. So, if the mourner is Jewish, it appropriate to observe and take comfort from these traditions and practices, even if the deceased is not Jewish. However, if the mourner(s) believe that the non-Jewish deceased would have found practices dishonorable, they should probably be avoided.



Sitting *shiva*

Timing

After the funeral, mourners begin a managed return from grief to “normal” life which begins with an intensive seven-day period of mourning known as *shiva*. At BHA, many of our members sit *shiva* the full week, while others decide on a shortened *shiva* schedule.

Shiva, which simply means seven in Hebrew, begins on the day of the funeral and continues for six subsequent days. *Shiva* ends on the morning of the seventh day. *Shiva* is suspended three hours before sunset on Friday afternoon and is resumed after Shabbat is over. If a major holiday, such as Pesach, Shavuot, Sukkot, Rosh Hashanna or Yom Kippur falls during the *shiva* period, *shiva* concludes three hours before the eve of the festival.

Practices for Mourners

Traditionally, mourner(s) stay home during the *shiva* period and refrain from participating in outside activities including work. When we experience a loss, mourners need to step out of everyday activity for a while. Relatives, friends, and members of the community support the mourners by visiting during *shiva*.

The *shiva* period begins after burial with a simple meal, the *seudat havra'ah*, the meal of consolation. There is a custom to rinse one's hands with water before entering the house for the meal as a way of leaving gravesite behind. This meal, traditionally provided by family and friends for the mourners, is not a social event; it is a time to rest and contemplate the day's events and generally only family and close friends should attend so as to avoid a party-like atmosphere. This is traditionally a simple meal, often with hard-boiled eggs, which symbolize the cycle of life. Neither meat nor wine, two symbols of joy, should be served at this meal.

During this seven day period, mourners traditionally do not leave their homes, so public prayer services are held in their homes. The service can be led by anyone who is comfortable leading the service.

There are a number of practices traditionally observed by those sitting *shiva*.

- A seven-day candle (provided by BHA or the funeral home) is lit upon returning from the cemetery.
- Mourners generally refrain from entertainment, such as television, during the week.
- Mourners generally cover the mirrors in their home, to show that we reduce the importance normally placed on personal vanity.
- Mourners are encouraged to observe the customs of not wearing shoes and sitting on low stools during *shiva*, which show that we change the way we live during this time.

Community Response

When members of our community are sitting *shiva*, it is the responsibility of everyone else in the community to fulfill the mitzvah of *nichum avelim*, comforting the mourners. We do this by bringing them food, helping with the tasks of life such as caring for children and shoveling the walk and showing up for minyan so that mourners can say kaddish. We strive to be a *kehilah kedosha* in every way, and among the most important is caring for others in their moments of grief.

Our Ritual Committee, chaired by Bill Smith (914.261.3992/wmurraysmith@aol.com), does the work of reaching out to our community and ensuring that we have a minyan. By definition, these calls are made without much lead time and in a small community such as ours, it can sometimes be a challenge to ensure that we have then 10 Jewish adults need to make minyan. If you are called to help make minyan, please come. If you are willing to be part of a phone tree to turn people out, please be in touch with Bill.



Even when many people have gathered, *shiva minyanim* are not parties. Tradition teaches that it is customary to enter the house of mourning in silence, to wait for the mourners to begin any conversation and to let them set the tone of that conversation. Some mourners may wish to share memories of the deceased, others may prefer to discuss last night's baseball game, and others may wish to sit quietly. A visitor's responsibility is to follow the mourners' lead. The door of the home should be left unlocked so that visitors can enter without knocking or ringing the doorbell.

Mourners are *not* obligated to have food or drink available for those who come to visit.

Saying Kaddish

When the mourning period is a year, kaddish is recited for eleven months and a day. One can choose, and it is appropriate to do so, to say *kaddish* for the full year, even if the obligation is only for thirty days. At BHA, both sons and daughters share the obligation to recite kaddish, which can be said any time we are davvening. Even if you are not able to say kaddish every day, it is worthwhile and appropriate to set a regular pattern of saying kaddish every week, for instance.

The obligation to say kaddish cannot be transferred to another person. A parent may tell children that it is not "necessary" to say kaddish or a child may feel that a parent "wouldn't have wanted me to say it." Mourning, however, is for the living, not the dead, and it is the mourner who needs to discern what will be appropriate for him or her.

Shleshoshim

Shiva ends on the morning of the seventh day, including the day of the burial. The rest of the month following burial is known as *shloshim*, which is Hebrew for 30, as in days³. During this period, mourners continue to say kaddish daily, and traditionally refrain from festive activities such as going to the movies, theater, dances or parties. However, they do return to their regular activities in business and home.

Shana

Only when one is mourning a parent does the period of formal mourning extend past *shloshim* into *shana*, which is a year, understood to be 11 months and one day. For those who are mourning a parent, the mourning practices of *shloshim* continue for the full year.

Remembering

Unveiling

A formal unveiling of the tombstone or grave marker is not necessary, though Rabbi Spodek and Cantor Gersh are available to facilitate the ceremony for families who desire them. The usual custom is to have the unveiling approximately one year following death.

Yahrzeit

Yahrzeit is observed each year on the date of death according to the Hebrew calendar, which moves relative to the secular calendar. BHA will do its best to notify members in advance of the secular date every year, if the

³ The Israelites mourned Moses for 30 days; see Deuteronomy 34:8



Yahrzeit records are on file. If you would like to ensure that your loved one's information is in our system, please be in touch with our administrator at admin@beaconhebrewalliance.org or 845.831.2012 x3.

It is customary to attend services on the date of the yartzheit or as close as possible. Once a month, we invite all who are marking yartzheit in a given month to join us for Zachor, a special memorial service. Of course, you are welcome to say kaddish at any scheduled service; please remember though, that we are a small community, and do not always have a minyan necessary to say kaddish. If you are coming to say kaddish, please reach out to your friends and family to ensure that we have a minyan for the service at which you plan to participate.

It is also customary to contribute tzedakah to the [1921 Legacy Fund](#) at BHA or to another organization which embodies the values of your loved one in their memory so that their values might live on after them.

Finally, those who have lost a loved one traditionally light a 24-hour candle on the yartzheit. The candle is lit the evening Yahrzeit begins. If Yahrzeit falls on Shabbat or Yom Tov, the candle is lit before the Shabbat or holiday candles. Although there is no formal blessing when lighting the candle, a meditation such as the one which follows may be said. It is appropriate, of course, to use your own words and thoughts in addition or in place of this meditation:

Holy One of Blessing, I light this candle on this the Yahrzeit of my dear _____. In loving testimony to his/her life, I pledge to make a tzedakah contribution to help perpetuate the values that were important to him/her. May the light of this candle be a reminder to me of the light my dear _____ brought to my life. May his/her soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life. Amen.

Yizkor

Yizkor, the memorial service, is recited four times a year: on Yom Kippur, Shmini Atzeret and the last days of Pesach and Shavuot. It is appropriate to come to the synagogue in memory of loved ones who have died. If you do plan on coming for those services; please plan to stay till the end; it is deeply inappropriate and offensive to abandon services after yizkor.

Memorial Plaques

In the BHA sanctuary, we have memorial tablets with plaques recording the Hebrew and English name of the deceased and the Hebrew date of death. For further information about memorial plaques, please visit <http://bit.ly/BHA-memorials> or contact our administrative assistant at admin@beaconhebrewalliance.org or 845.831.2012 x3.