

## ACCOMPANYING THE DEAD FOR BURIAL: Spiritual and Halachic Teachings

### Pending Death, Just After Death

When death is imminent, it is appropriate to include the *vidui* (“confession”) prayer in support of the dying person (*goses*). Alison Jordan, RN, MS, MFT, writes,

Rabbi Stuart Kelman writes, “The traditional function of the *vidui* at the end of life is to provide words for the person who is in the process of dying. Our tradition is remarkably silent concerning those who are standing by the bedside.

Upon death, as the soul departs, the following is said:

As the soul departs, the following is recited:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל, יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ, יְהוָה אֶחָד.  
 בָּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד. (ג' פעמים)  
 יְהוָה הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים. (ז' פעמים)  
 יְהוָה מֶלֶךְ יְהוָה מֶלֶךְ יְהוָה יְמִלְךָ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד.

If possible, the last words recited in the presence of the dying person should be the Shema. At the moment of death, those present should say the following:

יְהוָה נִתֵּן וִיהוּה לְקַח. יְהִי שֵׁם יְהוָה מְבָרָךְ מֵעַתָּה וְעַד עוֹלָם.  
 הַצּוֹר תָּמִים פָּעָלוּ בִּי כָּל דְּרָכָיו מְשֻׁפָּט,  
 אֵל אֲמוּנָה וְאֵין עוֹל, צְדִיק וְיֵשֶׁר הוּא.

Translation and transliteration of the passage above:

Hear, O Israel, Adonai is our God, only Adonai.

Blessed is the Name of God’s honored Dominion forever. (3 times)

Adonai is God. (7 times)

Adonai rules, Adonai has ruled, Adonai will rule forever.

*Sh’ma yisra-eil Adonai eloheinu Adonai echad.*

*Baruch shem k’vod malchuto l’olam va’ed. (3 times)*

*Adonai hu ha'elohim. (7 times)*

*Adonai melech, Adonai malach, Adonai yimloch l'olam va'ed.*

If possible, the last words recited in the presence of the dying person should be the *Sh'ma*. At the moment of death, those present should say the following:

Adonai has given, and Adonai has taken away.

Blessed is the Name of Adonai from now and forever.

The Rock, perfect is God's work, for all God's paths are just; God of faith without iniquity, righteous and fair is God.

*Adonai natan v'Adonai lakakh.*

*Yehi shem Adonai m'vorach mei'atah v'ad olam.*

*Hatzur tamim pa'alo ki chol d'rachav mishpat, Eil emunah v'ein aveil, tzadik v'yashar hu.*

### **Additional customs:**

Jewish law defines a "primary mourner" as a parent, sibling, child, or spouse of the deceased. Traditionally, all primary mourners who are present at the moment of death perform the ritual of *kri'ah* (tearing of a garment) at this point, and continue to wear the torn clothing as mourners. Others who are present in the room at the moment of death also perform the ritual of *kri'ah*, even if they will not be mourners. This could include physicians, nurses, caretakers, visiting friends, relatives, or others.

Primary mourners who are not present traditionally perform *kri'ah* either when they first learn of the death or at the time of the funeral service. (The common current practice is for primary mourners also to perform *kri'ah* at the funeral.)

It is understood that those in the room have been present and have witnessed the moment of transition, and, therefore, have had a direct experience of being in the presence of death.

It is customary that those who visit a cemetery wash their hands upon leaving the cemetery because they have been in the presence of death; all the more so for those who witness the actual moment of death. Even the death of a stranger is understood to affect a person and being a witness to the death is understood to leave the observer vulnerable, at least for a short time. *Kri'ah* marks that vulnerability.

### Other customs include:

- Closing the eyes and mouth of the deceased
- Straightening the limbs
- Covering the deceased, often with a sheet
- Placing a candle near the head of the deceased
- Opening the windows in the room (if weather is problematic, windows are opened briefly, then closed again)
- Covering the mirrors (at home – this does not apply in a hospital or other facility)

### Between Death and Burial

There are two areas of interest when we discuss what happens between death and burial: care of the body of the deceased and what mourners should do during this period. This period between the time of death and the burial is called *aninut*.

### Mourning Starts

A man who mourns during *aninut* is called an “*onen*”, a woman an “*onenet*”. This is when most people feel like they are “in-between”. An individual in this situation has no religious obligations beyond attending to the practical necessities of arranging for the funeral.

The Jewish understanding is that an *onen/onenet* is not able to focus on anything other than the immediate issue of the burial, and is not expected to be capable of any ritual observances (and may even be prohibited from doing them), even those that might otherwise be performed on a daily basis (such as reciting *Sh'ma*).

As Rabbi Maurice Lamm has observed: “The *onen* is a person in deep distress, a person yanked out of normal life and abruptly catapulted into the midst of inexpressible grief. He is disoriented, his attitudes are disarrayed, his emotions are out of gear. The shock of death paralyzes his consciousness and blocks out all regular patterns of orderly thinking.” (*The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, p. 21).

Indeed, we are discouraged from trying to comfort the mourner prior to the burial. *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers) teaches, “Do not console a person whose deceased relative lies before him” (4:23). Therefore, the common Western

customs of viewing the body and visitation are contrary to traditional Jewish practice.

Although an *onen/onenet* is exempt from all positive *mitzvot* (such as reciting the *Amidah*), he/she must observe all the prohibitive laws (for example, not eating non-kosher food). The mourner's main task is to attend to the details of the burial. Naturally, friends and community members may assist. There is no liturgy assigned for this period.

As for the body of the deceased, there are two main rituals associated with this *aninut* period:

*Taharah* - preparation of the body for burial

*Shmirah* "guarding" or "watching" the dead – keeping them company so the soul is not alone.

### **The *Taharah* Ritual**

In Jewish tradition, we are all holy beings created in the image of the Divine. This means that when we die, our body is considered a holy thing and should be treated with respect and dignity.

Jewish tradition also considers the holy spiritual aspect of a human being, the soul, to be eternal, returning to the Divine upon death. So, when a person dies, we have a special ritual to prepare the body for burial and at the same time, midwife the soul from this world to the next. This beautiful ritual is called *taharah*, from the Hebrew root having to do with purification.

The ritual includes physical washing of the body along with a powerful spiritual liturgy, and a pouring of water, all intended to assist the soul on its journey.

### ***Shmirah***

*Shmirah* is the ritual of guarding the deceased's body; in some ways it can be likened to an honor guard. Some prefer to call it "accompaniment" as we are ensuring that the soul does not feel alone during this time in which it is adjusting to not having a body.

It is traditionally done from the time of death until burial. In some communities *shmirah* is not begun until after the *taharah*. It is generally done in shifts, with each person doing the task for a few hours.

A *shomer* watches over the deceased from the time the deceased comes under the responsibility of the *Chevrah Kadisha* until the funeral and burial. In earlier times, the guarding of Jewish bodies was a physical concern, while today it provides comfort to the soul of the deceased and to the grieving families.

## The Jewish Funeral

A Jewish funeral is distinguished by its simplicity, humility, and solemnity. Its general format has not changed for thousands of years. It is usually held within 24 hours of passing, but no later than three days. The mitzvah of accompanying the dead to the final resting place is so great it supersedes all other mitzvot, including Torah study.

However, before the funeral can take place, the body of the deceased must be prepared for burial in accordance with Jewish tradition. The body is considered holy so it is treated with utmost respect, hence embalming and cremation are not allowed.

It is a moral obligation for those caring for the deceased to ensure that the proper preparation is carried out. If one has contracted with a funeral home, one should make sure that the funeral director and the staff know that the family wants a traditional Jewish funeral, with all that it entails.

The Components of a Jewish Funeral (from Chabad.org):

- **Taharah (Ritual washing of the body):** Before the funeral, the body of the deceased is prepared for burial by the *Chevrah Kadisha* in accordance with Jewish law and tradition. This includes ritually washing and dressing the deceased while certain prayers are recited, and placing the body in a kosher casket. Men attend to men, and women to women.
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- **Kri'ah (Rending of one's garments):** During the funeral service, the mourners recite a blessing and rend their garments in expression of grief. This includes one who lost a father, mother, spouse, son, daughter, brother, and sister.

- **Kavod (“Honor”; Paying Respects):** Accompanying the casket to its final resting place. This includes gathering at the funeral home or chapel, or at the gravesite prior to the burial, in order to recite Psalms and to speak of the merits of the deceased.
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- **Hesped (Eulogy):** This is an important element of *kavod* that is part of the funeral service.
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- **K’vurah (Burial):** This includes the recitation of *Mourners’ Kaddish* and other prayers by the mourners.
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- **Nechamah (Condolence):** Before leaving the gravesite, all present form a pathway comprised of two rows through which the mourners will walk as they leave the gravesite. As they pass, the congregation console the mourners.

### Jewish Burial Practices

*Levayah* literally means “accompanying” and is the essence of the *mitzvah* of burial. *Levayah* is used as the overall term for both the funeral service and the burial.

The funeral service (as distinguished from the burial) may be held at a separate location, such as a chapel, funeral home, synagogue, etc. or may be incorporated as part of the burial service. If *kri’ah* (tearing clothing or cutting a black ribbon worn on clothing as a symbol of mourning) has not been performed prior to the funeral/burial, now is the appropriate time to do so.

Today most Jews outside of Israel are buried in caskets.

Maimonides ruled that bodies should be buried in a wooden casket. However, in the Middle Ages, there was no general rule as to whether burial should be in a casket. In Spain, the casket was not in vogue. Among French Jews, the casket was made from the table that had witnessed the hospitality and generosity of the deceased. This was also the custom in Eastern Europe where rabbis were buried in caskets made from the desks at which they had studied.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Kabbalistic notion prevailed that it was meritorious for the dead to be buried in direct contact with the earth in fulfillment of the biblical verse “for dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return” (Gen. 3:19). Interment without a casket thus became the rule strictly adhered to by Orthodox Jews, and is the practice today in Israel, except for the bodies of soldiers.

The Talmud directs that all aspects of funeral and burial should be kept simple and inexpensive, and by extension fit and proper

The traditional burial service itself is very simple, composed of just a few elements:

- Carry the casket to graveside, stopping 7 times while reciting Psalm 91
- When reaching the grave, lower the casket while reciting *Tziduk Hadin*
- Invite others to place earth lovingly on casket
- Recite a Psalm (23, for example)
- (Optional) Recite *Eil Malei Rachamim*
- Say Kaddish

There are many variations to this, with additional Psalms and prayers included.

Filling in the grave is a mitzvah for each of us as an individual. The custom is to place the shovel back in the earth rather than passing it from hand to hand. The shovel may also be inverted to indicate that we are using it in an unusual way to show that we are not happy to see the person dead.

Customs vary as to how many shovelfuls to place – some placing 1, others 3, and others not counting. Customs also vary as to the filling in of the grave, with some congregations simply placing a symbolic covering of earth; others cover the top of the casket, while still others fill in the grave completely (with all options in between).

At the conclusion of Kaddish, those gathered at the gravesite form two lines through which the mourners pass on their way back to their cars. The symbolism is that the community shares their grief and offers support.

honoring them in death. The funeral and burial usually are done together, but often happen in two locations. For a funeral to be considered Jewish, a few key elements are usually present:

## The First Seven Days after Burial

After the burial, it is customary for the community to provide a meal of condolence to the mourning family. After the burial, the mourners traditionally return to the home in which they will be sitting *shiva*.

A pitcher of water and a cup are placed outside the door of the home. It is customary to wash one's hands by pouring a cup of water alternatively on both hands three times. As with the shovel at the cemetery, the cup is not passed from person to person.

The meal is prepared by members of the community or the primary mourners. Traditionally, foods include round foods, such as hard-boiled eggs, lentils, and garbanzo beans. The round shape of these foods symbolizes the continuous cycle of life. Sharing a meal is an affirmation that life must continue, even in the face of death.

The primary mourners begin formal mourning after burial during a 7-day period called *shiva* (literally, "seven"), an intense period in which they do nothing but mourn. (We speak of a mourner as "sitting *shiva*".) *Shiva* begins immediately following the burial and lasts for seven days, ending after the morning service on the seventh day. *Shiva* is not observed on the Sabbath or during Jewish holidays.

Jewish tradition offers very specific recommendations for gradual reentry into normal life. During the first week (*shiva*), the mourners are treated with the utmost care and respect. Their needs are met by the community: both physical/logistical needs, such as meals, babysitting, etc., and spiritual and emotional needs. The synagogue or funeral coordinator often assist in this process.

Traditionally, mourners remain at home during *shiva* and a service is held daily (often in the evening) at the home, so that the mourners may recite the *Mourners' Kaddish* together. Mourners are encouraged to join the congregation on Shabbat to say *Kaddish*. I

In some communities, services are held in the home both morning and evening. The tradition is that the Mourner's *Kaddish* is said in the presence of a *minyan* (prayer quorum of ten; plural, *minyanim*), to ensure that mourners do not grieve in isolation but are surrounded by members of their community.

The *Mourner's Kaddish* does not deal directly with death but speaks of the power and majesty of God. Perhaps the ancient rabbis understood that it is in the face of death that we are most likely to deny the existence of God.

We recite the Kaddish to reaffirm our belief. We express our feelings of loss and the hope that God will fill the vacuum that has been created in the world and in our hearts. Some people believe the *Kaddish* is also said for the benefit of the soul of the deceased to help facilitate its journey.

After the funeral, it is customary to say *Kaddish* at every service you attend during mourning. Traditionally, *Kaddish* is only said for immediate family, but you may say *Kaddish* for whomever you wish.

In instances where there are very few or no family members, the role of the community becomes central. People are needed to attend *minyanim*, bring meals, help with dishes and other housework, help with childcare and/or pet care, and so on.

The *shiva* period gives mourners time to withdraw from the business of the world and begin to integrate and accept their loss. At the close of the *shiva* period, the tradition is that friends or family accompany the mourner for a brief walk (e.g. around the block) to symbolize the start of the mourners' reentry into the world.

Our tradition emphasizes focusing on memory and things of emotional significance, and on relieving the mourner from focusing on the external world. For this reason, there are traditions that the mourner cover mirrors and need not bathe, shave, change clothes or use makeup. The aim of these practices is to de-emphasize externals, and to keep the focus on the spiritual and emotional aspects of loss.

Mourners do not work during the *shiva* period and usually stay at home. During the *shiva* period, mourners also do not participate in parties, concerts, shows, movies, or similar events that are celebratory in nature, nor do they participate in sex during this time. Mourners should focus on their loss in order to be able to gradually heal.

Mourners may sit on low stools or boxes during the *shiva* period as a means of expressing grief. Furthermore, this practice symbolizes the humility and pain of the mourner who is "brought low" by the passing of a loved one. A tall candle traditionally burns in the *shiva* home for seven days as a sign of memorial.

## The First 30 Days after Burial

The next stage of the mourning process is known as *shloshim* (literally, “thirty”). This 30-day period is counted from the day of the funeral (and includes the *shiva* period). Following *shiva*, the mourner generally returns to work during *shloshim* but is still not completely back in the world. This ongoing mourning is expressed by avoiding parties, concerts, and other forms of public entertainment.

The mourner continues to wear the *kri’ah* ribbon during this time.

At the conclusion of *shloshim*, the formal mourning period ends, except for those who are mourning parents. For these mourners, formal mourning, including the recitation of the Mourner’s *Kaddish*, lasts eleven months (or a full year). Some people may wish to mark the end of *shloshim* with a special *minyán*, where the mourner or family members talk about the deceased. Also, any public memorial service is usually held at the conclusion of *shloshim*. The memorial service may include several speakers and music or poetry that might not have been included in the funeral service.

After the completion of *shloshim*, we are required to return to normal activities; we are required by Jewish law to re-engage in life, get back to normal routines, and go on living. This is not only for our own health and welfare, but as a way to honor the life and accomplishments of the dead. We are encouraged to live a life that honors our lost family members, and this requires that we not only mourn but also live fully.

## The First Year after Burial

The period from the end of *shloshim* to the end of the first year after death is a time we are encouraged to get back into life, while honoring our dead on a daily basis through the saying of *Kaddish*. Traditionally, mourners who have lost a parent say *Kaddish* daily for eleven months (or a full year), while mourning for all other relatives ends with the *shloshim*. In modern practice, mourners may recite *Kaddish* for eleven months for other immediate relatives as well.

In addition to burial and mourning practices, there is a traditional obligation to create some form of *matzevah* (“monument”) to mark the site of the grave. The “unveiling” is a formal ceremony following the placement of the *matzevah*.

Customs differ, but the unveiling is generally held after *shloshim* and usually in the month before the first *yahrzeit*. The unveiling service is a relatively recent practice originating in the United States. Technically, a rabbi need not be present, but it is helpful to have an experienced person officiate.

The ceremony is very brief, usually including some psalms and readings, a few words about the deceased, the removal of a covering from the monument, the prayer *El Malei Rachamim*, and, if a *minyan* is present, the Mourner's *Kaddish*.

You may ask the rabbi to help you design an appropriate service to mark the occasion. The unveiling reminds us that we will continue to visit the grave on the deceased's *yahrzeit* and during the High Holiday season, and that their memory will always be with us as our life continues.

### **Honoring the Memory of Loved Ones**

Jewish life is filled with the memory of our lost loved ones. We honor those memories in a variety of ways, but specifically, we include the *Mourners' Kaddish* in special services four times during the year (called *Yizkor*; literally, "He (G-d) will remember"), and we mark the annual anniversary — the *Yahrzeit* (Yiddish, meaning "year time") of each death.

*Yizkor* services are specific memorial services in which we as a community call forth the memory of our lost family members and say specific prayers in addition to the *Mourners' Kaddish*.

The *yahrzeit*, on the other hand, is a way for individuals to honor their family by marking the day of death at home. Traditionally, we light a 24-hour candle at sundown on the anniversary of the deceased's death according to the Hebrew calendar. There are no special prayers to be recited when lighting the *yahrzeit* candle. Some people recite appropriate Psalms, some recall fond memories of the deceased. Some people simply take a few moments to reflect on the life of the deceased.