

Funeral & Mourning – Jewish & Interfaith Frequently Asked Questions

How soon after death should the funeral take place?

According to Jewish law and out of respect for both the deceased and mourners, the funeral should take place as soon as possible. It can be delayed if immediate relatives cannot arrive in time from out of town, or if there is not enough time for burial before Shabbat or a holiday.

What is *keriah*? Who should wear *keriah* ribbons?

It is a Jewish custom for mourners (the spouse, children, parents and siblings of the deceased) to tear a garment or a ribbon as an expression of grief. This is done privately prior to the funeral service.

Why do some people use an over-turned shovel when placing soil in the grave?

Not everything that Jews do in their religious rituals is a matter of Jewish law. Some acts and customs are based on cultural practices. Some communities insist that the shovel used to place earth in the grave must be held upside-down as a sign of reluctance to fulfill the mitzvah of burying the dead. Some say that just the first shovel of earth should be done in this way. Some say each person puts in three shovelfulls of earth, some say more, some say fewer. None of these choices are a matter of Jewish law. Each person, family and community should follow the customs that are meaningful for them.

What is the *Mourner's Kaddish*? Is a minyan required for it to be recited?

The Mourner's Kaddish, one of a few types of Kaddish prayers, expresses the mourner's love of God and acceptance of God's will, even while the mourner is feeling great loss and sorrow over the death of a loved one.

A minyan, ten Jewish adults (male only, in orthodox congregations), is required for reciting the Kaddish. The Mourner's Kaddish is recited by children (sons only, in orthodox congregations) for their parents for eleven months, and by immediate family for a brother, sister, son, daughter and wife for thirty days. The Mourner's Kaddish is also recited on the anniversary of the death of the mourned family member.

The prayer, which begins with "Magnified and glorified is His great name", is an ancient Aramaic poem. The last line, however, is Hebrew and comes from the Book of Job - "May He who makes peace in high places make peace for us and for all Israel. Amen." When reciting this last line, the mourner takes three steps back as if he/she is concluding his/her "audience" with God and retreating respectfully.

What is *shiva*? How is it observed?

Shiva is the seven day mourning period which begins after burial. Tradition holds that during shiva the mourners should take time from their everyday activities and distractions in order to honor the deceased and their own grief.

Why is a jug of water placed outside the home of the mourners?

Jewish custom holds that we should cleanse of death prior to entering a home. Therefore, it is customary to place a jug of water, a large bowl and paper towels outside the door of the home.

What should I bring to the home of a mourner?

The Seudat Havra'ah, or meal of condolence, is prepared by the friends of the mourners. It is therefore appropriate to bring food items to the home. Please consider the mourning family's dietary needs (kosher etc.)

How can I be of greatest help to a mourner?

Be present. Jewish custom states that we should be a quiet and comforting presence to the mourners. Rather than to inquire about their wellbeing, which in most cases is quite apparent, it is our duty to allow them their own time to arrive at conversation and with patience, to provide for their ease.

What is the Chevra Kadisha?

It is a group of people entrusted with the mitzvah of preparing the body for burial.

What is the Reform Jewish view on organ transplant?

Reform Judaism approves the donating of parts of one's body in order to save another human being. It permits the donation of the body to a medical institution provided that it is buried after the study is completed.

What is the Reform Jewish view of autopsies?

Autopsy is permitted in Reform Judaism. It is in fact recommended if the purpose is the increase of medical knowledge.

[If you have any questions which are not addressed in this document, please contact me for clarification.](#)