

Judaism and Bereavement:

A Guide to Mourning

Provided By

Washington Hebrew Congregation



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The Bereavement Period

Jewish rituals guide the bereaved through a year-long process of mourning. The year is divided into three stages, each serving a different purpose for the mourner.

The *shiva* period, named after the Hebrew word for “seven,” is the first seven days following the burial of a loved one. It is the period in which the most intense mourning occurs. It is a time when the mourner may refrain from normal activities, like going to work or socializing. These distractions are discouraged during *shiva* so that the time may be used for reminiscence and the sharing of stories about the deceased. *Shiva* begins when the mourners return from the funeral and ends on the morning of the seventh day after the funeral.

As *shiva* ends, the period of *shloshim* begins. Named after the Hebrew word for “thirty,” *shloshim* is the first thirty days after the burial of a loved one. During *shloshim*, many of the restrictions on the mourner are lifted, yet they are still given the space to grieve. While the mourners may return to work and ease their way back into their daily routines, distractions are still limited. This period protects the mourner from rushing, or being rushed, back into life and ignoring his or her grief and sorrow.

According to tradition, children are obligated to continue their mourning for a full year following the death of a parent. Despite this obligation being only for the children, there is no prohibition against other family and close friends continuing the

mourning period for the full year. For mourners, experiencing “firsts” during this year is expected to be difficult. Holidays, birthdays, and family celebrations are among the hardest for mourners to face. Thus, during the year, many of the distractions from the *shloshim* period are still limited, with the exception of family gatherings and celebrations. The purpose of this period is to continue to ease the mourner back into everyday life and remind the mourner that he or she must continue to live. This period comes to a conclusion with the anniversary of the death, the *yahrzeit*, after which the mourner recites *Kaddish* on a yearly basis.

As the first year of mourning comes to an end, the family gathers again to set the gravestone. Traditionally, this would happen no earlier than eleven months following the death. The purpose of the gravestone is to keep the memory of the deceased alive as well as to identify the grave. The setting of the gravestone is accompanied by an **Unveiling Service** which can be led by the family or an officiating rabbi or cantor. The name of the service derives from the act of removing the cloth covering the gravestone during the ceremony. The Unveiling Service offers additional opportunity to pay tribute to the deceased as well as to speak to the living about the meaning of life and death.



Customs and Traditions of Shiva

There are many customs and traditions that accompany the period of *shiva*, as well as restrictions. Here you will find descriptions of these customs and restrictions, as well as the reasons behind them.



Who should sit Shiva?

Jewish law prescribes that *shiva* should be observed by the parents, siblings, spouse and children of the deceased. As well, these same groups should also recite *Kaddish* for the deceased.

"Let [the mourner] accept the schedule set down by the sages: three days for weeping, seven for lamenting, thirty days for mourning."

Shulchan Aruch

When deciding on how many days to observe *shiva*, remember that the purpose of *shiva* is to permit the grieving process. Jewish tradition acknowledges the difference between the first three days of *shiva*, when grief tends to be overwhelming, and the remainder of the week, as mourners begin to face the future. There are many reasons why one may decide to shorten *shiva*. For parents of school-aged children, for families who live out of town, for families who have dealt with a long illness prior to the death, or for mourners whose professions do not allow them to be away for an entire week, seven days may be too much. Carefully select the number of days that is right for your family.

Where do we hold Shiva?

Shiva is typically held in the home of the deceased or the home of a principal mourner (parent, child, spouse or sibling).

Do we need to have water outside our home?

It is traditional to wash one's hands when leaving the cemetery as a ritual gesture to separate the *mitzvah* of honoring the dead and the *mitzvah* of consoling the bereaved. While a basin of water is typically placed near the exit of the cemetery, you may choose to place a basin of water and a towel outside your door for *shiva*, as well.

"The soul is the lamp of God." (Proverbs 20:27) How do we light the Seven-Day Memorial Candle?

Light is a symbol of the soul. It is a reminder of the divine spark that is in all of us. Since the soul is attached to the body as the flame is to the wick, a candle is kept burning throughout the seven days of *shiva*. The candle should be placed in a prominent spot and is lit without saying a blessing upon returning from the cemetery. The honor of lighting this candle may go to anyone, even a child, who is mourning the deceased. Typically the candle is provided for the family by the funeral home.

Must we sit on low benches?

Traditionally, one would sit on the floor, on cushions or on low benches as an outward sign of being struck down by grief. In Reform practice, it is not a requirement to observe this tradition.

Why do we cover the mirrors?

The mirror is a sign of human vanity, thus by covering it, we remind ourselves that during this week, we need not care about our appearance. Some choose to refrain from shaving, applying makeup, or cutting their hair.

Where do I get a Condolence Book?

The Condolence Book is typically included in the funeral package provided by the funeral home. You may choose to place this in a prominent spot at the synagogue or in your home for visitors to sign.

Who provides the food during Shiva?

Traditionally, a mourner is not allowed to prepare food for the meal following the return from the funeral, because his or her focus should be on grieving for the deceased. It is considered a great *mitzvah* to console and care for the bereaved. Providing food for the mourner is a reminder to the mourner that life must go on. Today, friends of the family will typically provide the food for the *shiva*.

Many families end up with more food than they can possibly eat or freeze. With the help of friends, we encourage you to send the surplus to a local soup kitchen. Further, if a friend asks what he or she can bring, if you have enough food already, suggest that he or she make a donation to a local food pantry, the Tikkun Olam Values Fund at Washington Hebrew, or to Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger in honor of the deceased.

Are there special foods we should eat during Shiva?

It is traditional to eat round foods, e.g. lentils and hard-boiled eggs, that remind us of the cycle of life. Eggs being an obvious symbol of life are a reminder to the mourners to affirm hope in the face of death. Additionally, bread is the staff of life in Judaism and is especially appropriate at this time.

What is the purpose of the service during Shiva?

During *shiva*, a prayer service is often held in the home of the mourners to allow them to recite the *Kaddish*, the prayer which praises God and asks God to bring peace to the world. Any knowledgeable Jew may lead the service, however, typically Washington Hebrew Congregation will provide a rabbi, cantor, or a trained lay-leader to lead you in prayer. The Temple also provides prayerbooks and *kippot* (yarmulkes).

Must I recite Kaddish every day?

Jewish law requires the principle mourners to recite the Mourner's *Kaddish* three times each day—morning, afternoon and night—during *shiva*. Reform Jews most often have only one *minyan* each day, usually in the late afternoon or early evening. However, if the mourners choose not to observe all seven days of *shiva* and are not able to attend a daily *minyan*, they should not feel obligated to recite *Kaddish* every day. The mourners may find other creative ways to remember their loved one and praise God for life each day.

Am I supposed to go to Services?

On *Shabbat*, the mourner is encouraged to join his or her community at services to recite *Kaddish* for his or her loved one, even during the *shiva* period. At Washington Hebrew Congregation, your loved one's name will be recited before *Kaddish* for four weeks, the period of *shloshim*. You are encouraged to come to services to say *Kaddish* during this period. Additionally, it is appropriate if you wish to say *Kaddish* daily for the first year following the burial. After the first four weeks, please feel free to add your loved one's name to the *Kaddish* list when you attend services so that it may be read before the recitation of *Kaddish*.

Is there anything else I should know?

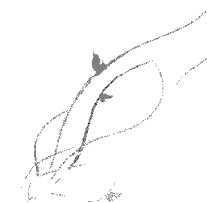
If you are comfortable doing so, when you are home the doors to your home would remain unlocked so that visitors may enter on their own accord. Ringing the doorbell often distracts the mourner and causes the mourner to act as a host.

During the funeral service and interment, it is advisable to have someone stay at your home until you return. This practice is encouraged because, in most cases, the time of the funeral has been published in the paper.

You may consider asking a good friend to keep track of who sends you gifts, provides food or helps you during your period of mourning.

Traditionally, during *shiva* one would refrain from wearing leather, fur, jewelry or any other sign of

luxury. This is an outward sign of being humbled by a loss.



Helpful Checklist

(As stated above, there is no need to observe all of these—choose what is helpful to you. Remember, your role as a mourner is to take care of your family and grieve. Others are to take care of you.)

- Location of *Shiva*
- Time of *Shiva* Service
- Number of Days to Observe *Shiva*
- Basin of Water
- Memorial Candle
- Low Benches or Seats
- Mirrors Covered
- Condolence Book
- Friend to Arrange the Food
- Rabbi, Cantor, Lay-Leader to Lead Service
- Friend to stay at home during the Funeral
- Friend to keep a list of those who gave gifts, food or helped in some way

Helpful Hints During the Bereavement Period

The purpose of the Bereavement Period is to help the mourner slowly find his or her way back to an active life. At the beginning of this period, during *shiva*, sharing stories of the deceased, looking at family pictures, and keeping a journal of your thoughts and emotions may be helpful.

As the week of *shiva* passes and you move into the stage of *shloshim*, taking walks or bike rides, praying, reading a book and listening to music are all ways to slowly re-enter your active life.

Finally, it cannot be exaggerated how tiring the Bereavement Period can be. Above all else, it is important that the mourners find ample time to rest. Whether the death was unexpected or followed a long illness, the act of burying your loved one is exhausting. Do not feel guilty for finding quiet time for yourself. If need be, place a sign on the door that clearly states the visiting hours. No one will be offended by your need to be alone.

At any point during the Bereavement Period, if you wish to speak to your Washington Hebrew Congregation Clergy, please make an appointment with us by calling the Rabbi's Office at 202-362-7100.



Poems, Psalms and Kaddish

Birth is a beginning, and death a destination;
But life is a journey, a going –
a growing from stage to stage.
From childhood to maturity and youth to age.
From innocence to awareness
and ignorance to knowing;
From foolishness to discretion
and then perhaps to wisdom.
From weakness to strength
or strength to weakness—
And, often, back again.
From health to sickness and back, we pray,
to health again.
From offense to forgiveness, from loneliness to love,
from joy to gratitude,
From pain to compassion, and grief to
understanding — from fear to faith.
From defeat to defeat to defeat— until,
looking backward or ahead,
We see that victory lies not at some high place along
the way, but in having made the journey, stage by
stage—a sacred pilgrimage.
Birth is a beginning, and death a destination;
But life is a journey, a sacred pilgrimage made stage
by stage—from birth to death to life everlasting.

Rabbi Alvin I. Fine



When I die give what's left of me away
To children and old men.
And if you need to cry,
Cry for your brother walking the street beside you.
And when you need me, put your arms around
anyone and give them what you need to give me.

I want to leave you something,
Something better than words or sounds.
Look for me in the people I've known or loved,
And if you cannot give me away,
At least let me live in your eyes and not in your
mind.

You can love me best by letting hands touch hands,
And by letting go of children that need to be free.
Love doesn't die, people do.
So, when all that's left of me is love,
Give me away.

Merrit Malloy

I will lift up my eyes to the hills, from where does
my help come? My help comes from *Adonai*, the
maker of heaven and earth. God will not suffer my
foot to be moved; God who keeps me will not
slumber nor sleep. *Adonai* is my keeper; *Adonai* is
the shade upon my right hand. The sun will not
smite me by day, nor the moon by night. *Adonai*
will preserve me from all evil; God will preserve my
soul. *Adonai* shall preserve my going and my
coming in from this time forth and forever.

Psalm 121

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He
maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth
me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul; He
guideth me in straight paths for His name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the
shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art
with me; Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort
me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence
of mine enemies; Thou hast anointed my head with
oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and
mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I
shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Psalm 23



Do not stand at my grave and weep,
I am not there, I do not sleep.

I am a thousand winds that blow.
I am the diamond glint on snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.
I am the gentle autumn rain.

When you wake in the morning hush,
I am the swift, uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circling flight.
I am the soft starlight at night.

Do not stand at my grave and weep.
I am not there, I do not sleep.
Do not stand at my grave and cry.
I am not there, I did not die!

Mary Frye

All Is Well

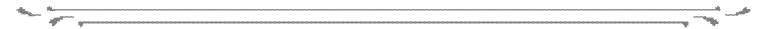
Death is nothing at all,
I have only slipped into the next room
I am I and you are you
Whatever we were to each other,
that we are still.
Call me by my old familiar name,
Speak to me in the easy way which you always used
Put no difference in your tone,
Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow
Laugh as we always laughed
at the little jokes we enjoyed together.
Play, smile, think of me, pray for me.
Let my name be ever the household word
that it always was,
Let it be spoken without effect,
without the trace of shadow on it.
Life means all that it ever meant.
It is the same as it ever was,
there is unbroken continuity.
Why should I be out of mind
because I am out of sight?
I am waiting for you,
for an interval,
somewhere very near,
Just around the corner.
All is well.

Henry Scott Holland



In the rising of the sun and in its going down,
We remember them.
In the blowing of the wind and in the chill of winter,
We remember them;
In the opening of buds and in the rebirth of spring,
We remember them;
In the rustling of leaves and in the beauty of
autumn
We remember them;
In the beginning of the year and when it ends,
We remember them;
When we are weary and in need of strength,
We remember them;
When we are lost and sick at heart,
We remember them;
When we have joys we yearn to share,
We remember them.
So long as we live, they too shall live,
For they are now a part of us, as
We remember them.

Gates of Repentance



Suggested Books for Further Reading:

Diamont, Anita. Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead & Mourn as a Jew. Schocken Books, New York, 1998.
Syme, Daniel B. The Jewish Home: A Guide for Jewish Living. URJ Press, New York, 2004.
Lamm, Maurice. The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning. Jonathan David Publishers, Middle Village, NY, 1969.

Other Sources used to create this Guide Book:

Klein, Isaac. A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York and Jerusalem, 1979.
Gates of Repentance. Central Conference of American Rabbis, New York, 1978.

Compiled 2011/5771

Kaddish

יִתְגַּדַּל וְיִתְקַדַּשׁ שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא. בְּעַלְמָא דִּי בְּרָא כְּרֵעוּתָהּ, וְיִמְלִיךְ
מַלְכוּתָהּ בְּחַיִּיכוֹן וּבְיָוִמִיכוֹן וּבְחַיֵּי דְכָל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל. בְּעַגְלָא
וּבְזִמְן קָרִיב וְאִמְרוּ אָמֵן.

Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei raba b'alma div'ra
chir'utei v'yamlich malchutei b'chayeichon
uv'yomeichon uv'chayei d'chal beit Yisraeil
ba-agalah uviz'man kariv, v'im'ru: amein.

יְהֵא שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא מְבָרַךְ לְעָלַם וּלְעָלְמֵי עָלְמַיָּא.
Y'hei sh'mei raba m'varach l'alam ul'almei almaya.

וְיִתְבָּרַךְ וְיִשְׁתַּבַּח, וְיִתְפָּאֵר וְיִתְרוֹמֵם וְיִתְנַשֵּׂא וְיִתְהַדָּר וְיִתְעַלֶּה
וְיִתְהַלַּל שְׁמֵהּ דְקֻדְשָׁא בְּרִידָא הוּא.

Yitbarach v'yishtabach v'yitpa-ar v'yitromam
v'yitnasei v'yithadar v'yitaleh v'yithalal sh'mei
d'kudsha b'rich hu.

לְעֵלָא מִן כָּל בִּרְכָתָא וְשִׁירָתָא, תְּשֻׁבְחָתָא וְנַחֲמָתָא, דְאִמְרוּן
בְּעַלְמָא, וְאִמְרוּ אָמֵן.

L'eila min kal birchata v'shirata tushb'chata
v'nehchemata da-amiran b'alma v'im'ru: amein.

יְהֵא שְׁלָמָא רַבָּא מִן שְׁמַיָּא וְחַיִּים עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאִמְרוּ
אָמֵן.

Y'hei sh'lama raba min sh'maya v'chayim aleinu
v'al kol Yisraeil v'i-m'ru: amein.

עֲשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמְרוֹמָיו הוּא יַעֲשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל,
וְאִמְרוּ אָמֵן.

Oseh shalom bim'romav hu ya-aseh shalom aleinu
v'al kol Yisraeil, v'im'ru: amein.