

A Guide to Mourning Practices in the Tradition of Conservative Judaism

By Rabbi Raphael Rank

Barukh Dayan Ha'Emet-Praised is the Judge of Truth. This is the traditional Jewish response to death. We praise God at a time of sorrow because we recognize a great truth in the reality of death-that we must appreciate each other, respect one another, and love one another as much as we can while we can, for life comes to a close too soon. And after that closing, it is not so simple to make amends for all of our missteps.

There is no easy way to say goodbye to a loved one. Death remains one of the great mysteries of life, a mystery which compels most anyone who faces it to seek direction and guidance. Death is a time when we naturally think about questions that have no answers. And we meet, face-to-face, with a frightening reality: our own mortality. At the same time, it is death that gives life a certain urgency. We dare not put off until tomorrow that which must be done today. We do not have infinite time on this earth. But God has given us the principles whereby we can make the most of our time on this earth.

The wisdom of our sages and the inspiration afforded by belief in God have combined to give us an amazing ritual structure to help us cope with loss. In fact, the Jewish people have long been famous for their simple, yet dignified traditions surrounding bereavement. A number of traditions vary when mourning a parent, for children are under an obligation to "honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12). Such variations are pointed out throughout this reading. In brief, these traditions are our sacred traditions and this is a brief explanation of them all.

Two mitzvot [pronounced: **meetz-VOT**; meaning: Godly commands] shape the Jewish practices of mourning. The first is **kevod hamet** [pronounced: **ki-VOD ha-MAYTT**] which means honoring the dead. Our sages compared the sacredness of the deceased to that of an impaired Torah scroll which, although no longer usable, still retains its holiness. In Jewish tradition, therefore, the greatest consideration and respect is accorded the dead. The second mitzvah [pronounced: **meetz-VA**; meaning: Godly command] is **nihum avilim**] pronounced **nee-HOM a-vay-LEEM**] which means comforting the mourners. When a member of the community dies, it is the community's responsibility to lovingly assist the deceased's family in this final act of respect. Such assistance is known as **hesed shel emet** [pronounced: **He-sed SHEL e-MET**; meaning: a pure act of loving kindness] for it is performed without ulterior motive, the dead being unable to repay the favor.

When the Jewish people need to know what to do, whether it is for a time of happiness or sadness, we turn to **Halakhah** [pronounced; **ha-la-HA**; meaning walking]. Halakhah is a Hebrew term meaning "walking" or, in essence, Jewish Law. Jewish Law is the way Jews walk the road of life. It is Halakhah which determines what must be done, what need not be done, and what should not be done. The practices of the Conservative Movement are based on Halakhah and as such, we guide our actions by it. By following Halakhah, we perpetuate the authentic practices of the Jewish people, the way we interact with each other and the way we interact with God.

FUNERAL ARRANGEMENTS

TIMING OF THE FUNERAL

Burial should take place as quickly as possible, usually within 24-48 hours of death. Although burial may be delayed for a variety of reasons, it should not be delayed longer than necessary. Funerals never take place on Shabbat or festivals. Such gatherings of the Jewish people are happy occasions and in our tradition, happiness has a greater power than sadness. The happy occasion compels us to delay the sad.

SHEMIRAH-WATCHING THE BODY

The deceased should not be left alone prior to burial and isn't, as long as there is a **shemirah**, [pronounced: **shi-mee-RA**; meaning: guarding]. Funeral chapels generally have provisions for the hiring of a **shomer** [pronounced **sho-MER**; meaning : guard] who, remaining with the deceased, recites psalms and studies Torah. Where the funeral chapel allows a member or friend of the family to act a **shomer**, it is a beautiful act of **kevod hamet** (meaning: honoring the dead).

AUTOPSY

The Jewish people generally do not allow for routine autopsy since it is viewed as an unnecessary invasion of the body. Where autopsy would be required by state law, naturally we consent. Nevertheless, in most cases when autopsy is recommended, the family may refuse.

ORGAN DONATION

Where the donation of an organ to another person in need will save that person's life or significantly improve that person's life, such an act is not regarded as a desecration of the body. To the contrary, it is regarded as a mitzvah. The mitzvah of **piku'ah nefesh** [pronounced **pee-KOO-ah NE-fesh**; meaning saving a life] takes precedence over almost all other mitzvot in the tradition. Moreover, the act of helping the living may bring comfort to the mourners, again a mitzvah of the highest order. It is therefore permissible to will or donate organs and tissues specifically for use in another person's body. The donation of one's body to science is not regarded as an act of **piku'ah nefesh**.

TAHARAH (RITUAL CLEANSING)

The body is cleansed according to a prescribed ritual known as **taharah** [pronounced **ta-ha RA**; meaning purification]. It is an expression of respect and the prayers recited upon the washing are filled with reverence for the body that has faithfully carried the soul through life. A group of specially trained people who compose a **Chevra Kadisha** [pronounced **HEV-ra-ka-DEE-sha**; meaning : Holy Society] perform this mitzvah.

TAKRIKHIM (BURIAL ATTIRE)

The body is dressed in plain white garments known as **takrikhim** [pronounced **tah-ree-HEEM**; meaning burial clothing]. Families sometimes want to dress the deceased in clothing that typified their loved one, and this is understandable. But the tradition of **takrikhim** suggests that

as we enter this world as equals, so too we leave this world as equals. In addition, a Jewish male is customarily buried wearing a **kippah** [pronounced: **kee-PA**; meaning yarmulkeh] and his own **tallit** [pronounced: **ta-LEET**; meaning: prayer shawl], with one of the tassels snipped off to indicate the **tallit** is no longer kosher. It is also important to note that with women increasingly assuming these rituals, they too, may be buried with **kippah** and **tallit**.

EMBALMING

Embalming impedes the natural decomposition of the body. Our tradition would have the body decompose quickly and naturally. This principle embodies the Torah's view "...for dust you are and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19). At the same time that the earth ultimately embraces the body, the heavens embrace the soul. Part of us becomes one with the earth and the other, one with GOD.

CREMATION

Cremation is not a Jewish act. Clearly, there are ethnic groups that cremate their dead and do so only with love and respect for the body, but in the Jewish tradition, cremation does not fit into our understanding of **kevod hamet**. As Conservative Jews, we have an obligation to protect and perpetuate our sacred traditions. Burial is thus the Jewish route. Moreover, in this post-Holocaust age, cremation conjures up a host of painful memories for the Jewish community and is yet another reason why this act should be avoided by Jews.

ARON CASKET

Traditional Jewish burial actually took place without a casket. The deceased was simply placed directly into the earth. Today, civil law requires the use of a casket. A kosher casket or aron [pronounced: a-RON; meaning casket] is one made entirely of wood, without nails or metal decoration. There is no need to purchase an aron made out of anything other than untreated plain pine. One could argue that a fancy casket fits into our value of **kevod hamut**. But Jewish tradition would argue that the money spent on a fancy casket is better invested in the living, with the donation made in memory of the deceased.

LINERS AND VAULTS

A liner is a bottomless, rectangular concrete structure, with a top, into which the casket is lowered. A cemetery will sometimes require its use to inhibit ground sinkage. Although Halakhah would prefer that it not be used, the liner is not technically a violation of Jewish Law. A vault, however, is a steel reinforced concrete structure with both a top and bottom. Since a vault prevents the casket from touching the ground, its use is a violation of Halakhah and adds an unnecessary financial burden on the family.

ABOVE GROUND BURIAL

Above ground burial is generally not permitted.

FLOWERS

The use of flowers at Jewish funerals is generally discouraged. It is certainly not disrespectful, but it falls into that category of unnecessary expenses that we do not want families to incur. Friends and family who wish to show some concrete expression of condolence should be encouraged to contribute to a worthy charity in memory of the deceased.

VIEWING

Public viewing of the body is not part of the traditional Jewish service. In remembering our loved ones, we should remember them vital and full of life, rather than how they may appear in death. Although ritual viewing is discouraged,, a trusted member or friend of the family should identify the deceased. As difficult as it may be to imagine, mistakes in busy funeral homes can take place.

AVEL THE MOURNER

At the time of death, many people grieve, but our tradition will only identify certain people as the official mourners. An **avel** [pronounced **a-VEL**; meaning mourner] is anyone who has lost a spouse, sibling, parent, or child. A grandchild, therefore, may grieve but is not an **avel**. Likewise, a nephew or niece may grieve, but neither is an **avel**. WE thus limit the number of people upon whom the obligation to mourn falls, in keeping with the life-orientation of Judaism. Were this not the case, it is conceivable that people would find themselves in a state of perpetual mourning, and our tradition, with its emphasis on happiness and joy, would find this unacceptable.

KERIAH RENDING OF THE GARMENTS

The mourner participates in **keriah** [pronounced **ki-ree-A**; meaning tearing] just prior to the service. The traditional method of **keriah** is to tear the right side of one's shirt or blouse just below the collar. When tearing for a parent, one tears on the left side which tradition deems closer to the heart. We rip the clothing as a symbol—the loss of a loved one is a tear in the fabric of our lives and so the ripping of clothing is a very powerful rite. In modern times, the ripping of a black ribbon attached to the clothing has become commonplace. This is kosher, but typically not as powerful an act as the ripping of one's clothing. **Keriah** is worn for the full **shivah**, though of mourning for a parent, it is worn for **sheloshim** or the thirty day mourning period.

Keriah should not be worn on Shabbat or Yom Tov, for the sanctity and serenity of these days supersede personal grief.

THE SERVICE

The service is generally conducted at the funeral home or gravesite. It is brief and simple. Psalms and **El Malei Rahamim** [pronounced **El ma-LAY ra-ha-MEEM**; meaning: "God, full of Compassion," which constitute the first three words of the traditional memorial prayer] are chanted. A **hesped** [pronounced: **hes-PAYD**; meaning: eulogy] honoring the deceased is given. Fraternal ceremonies and instrumental music are not appropriate during the funeral service.

It has become customary for members of the family or friends to pay tribute to the deceased. The number of speakers and the order in which they speak should be determined prior to the ceremony. These tributes should be brief. Remember that guests at the funeral have often taken time off from work to make the funeral and a ceremony that runs overly long becomes an imposition upon them. If the chapel has arranged back to back funerals, as they often do, the first funeral that runs over time will force the second funeral to begin late. There is a great courage and honor in eulogizing a friend or family member, but it must be done with due respect for the attending guests and any other arrangements planned for that day.

PALLBEARERS

Family and friends, men and women, Jews and non-Jews, may serve as the pallbearers, all of whom are carefully chosen by the family. Should family or friends wish to carry the casket from the hearse to the grave, certainly part of the **kevod hamet** tradition, the cemetery will probably request that some waiver of liability be signed by each pallbearer.

BEIT ALMIN AT THE CEMETERY

WHO MAY ATTEND?

Anyone may go to the cemetery. Sometimes there is a concern about bringing children to the cemetery, but the concern is largely unfounded. It is good for children to see that a cemetery is not a “scary” place and that the various rituals are all acts of love and respect. The idea that a pregnant woman should not go to the cemetery is pure superstition. There is no reason why a pregnant woman should not go. The only restriction is that traditionally a **kohen** [pronounced **ko-HAYN**; meaning a member of a priestly order] goes to the cemetery only if an **avel**. The **kohen**, as a member of the oldest Jewish family representing the traditional practices of Judaism, stays away from death, as he/she represents a tradition that forever emphasizes life.

CARRYING THE CASKET

The pallbearers customarily stop seven times while carrying the casket to the grave. The act symbolizes hesitancy in bidding a final farewell to the deceased. The casket precedes the mourners, family and friends, as a sign of respect.

KEVURAH BURIAL

The casket is lowered into the ground. **Kevurah** [pronounced: **ki-voo-RA**; meaning: burial] is performed by family and friends since they are most capable of burying with the love and dignity such an act deserves, unlike strangers, hired help, or machinery. At the appropriate time, all who wish to participate let three shovelfuls of earth fall, very gently, into the grave. The shovel is replaced in the mound of dirt, but not passed from one person to the next, so as not to symbolize the passing of sorrow from one person to the next. If a **minyan** [pronounced **meen-YAN**; meaning: ten Jewish adults] is present, the **kaddish** [pronounced: **ka-DEESH**; meaning: the prayer of praise to GOD] is recited.

RETURNING HOME

At the conclusion of the burial, the mourner walks down an aisle created by the guests who stand in two rows facing each other. The guests recite words of comfort to the mourners. Before entering one's home, it is also traditional to wash the hands, without a blessing. Water is a symbol of life, and we wash our hands as if washing death away and preparing our hands to do the work of life—comforting, consoling, and healing. A pitcher of water, paper toweling and a garbage bag should be placed at the front door of the shiva home to allow people to wash their hands.

PERIODS OF MOURNING

SHIVAH THE FIRST SEVEN DAYS

Shivah [pronounced: **sheev-A**; meaning the first seven days after burial] is the seven-day period of mourning observed by the immediate family of the deceased, beginning on the day of burial. Whether one observes shivah for the full seven day period or some lesser period of time, there are always seven days of mourning that follow burial. The wisdom of a week off for mourners is clear. It is the least amount of time necessary to recover from the trauma of loss and allows for a community to come and extend condolences. During the entire seven days, the mourner stays away from work or school, remains at home and lets the healing process unfold.

Public mourning observances are suspended on Shabbat in view of the belief that the sanctity and serenity of this day supersedes personal grief. Mourners are encouraged to attend Shabbat services, but they are not given an **aliyah** [pronounced **a-lee-YA**; meaning Torah Honor] and do not conduct the services. Major festivals terminate shivah.

SE'UDAT HAVRA'AH A MEAL OF HEALING

It is customary for family and friends to arrange for a kosher **se'udat** [pronounced: **si-oo-DAT hav-ra-A**, meaning; meal of healing] served to the mourners at the shivah home upon the mourners' return from the cemetery. Hard-boiled eggs should be available as they symbolize birth. Any round foods, like olives, lentils, or nuts are appropriate as their rounded shapes suggest the cyclical nature of life. We do not deny the reality of death, but we cannot forget that birth is also a part of that sacred cycle, and that the happiness of birth and new life will come our way. The mourners should not serve as hosts or otherwise entertain their visitors.

OTHER MOURNING CUSTOMS

A seven-day memorial candle is lit, a symbol for the soul. It is customary to cover mirrors in the shivah home, thus releasing the mourner from any preoccupation with physical appearance. In the same vein, mourners do not wear leather shoes as they go nowhere during the shivah, except possibly to the synagogue. Men would typically not shave, growing a shivah beard for as long as the sheloshim (meaning; the thirty day period of mourning). Mourners sit on the floor or low stools, a reflection of their low spirits. This tradition is not meant to make them uncomfortable, but only to distinguish them as the mourners. Greetings between mourners and visitors are not normally exchanged, though talk about the deceased is certainly appropriate. Whatever brings comfort to the mourners and is within the boundaries of the tradition is good.

KADDISH SANCTIFYING GOD’S NAME

The tradition to conduct services in the shivah home provides the mourner with the minyan required for the recitation of **kaddish** [pronounced: **ka-DEESH**; meaning: a prayer of praise to God]. The **kaddish**, so often associated with mourners, is a way in which the mourners reestablish a connection with God at a time when that relationship may be strained. They praise God out of a sense of gratitude for having had this loved one in their lives. To say **kaddish** regularly is a great tribute to the memory of a loved one.

Kaddish is the obligation of the mourners. **Kaddish** is recited for the **sheloshim** (meaning; the thirty day period of mourning) at both the morning and evening services. Children who mourn parents recite **kaddish** for eleven months at both the morning and evening services. Making a commitment to attend the synagogue during a period of mourning is among the most healing rituals in our tradition. Being among people, doing something for our loved one who has passed on, and doing something for ourselves, are a combination that brings much comfort to the mourners. It is a time commitment but not one that is unreasonable or impossible to fulfill. Those who have made the commitment repeatedly attest to its salutary effects.

Some people ask about the hiring of an individual to recite **kaddish**. The short answer to this inquiry is that we generally don’t do it. **Kaddish** is one of those prayers that needs to be recited by the mourner. It’s not an obligation that someone else can take on, especially for financial compensation. Grandchildren and other relatives who wish to memorialize a loved one through prayer can do so, but not with **kaddish**. Jewish tradition has deliberately limited those who are obligated to mourn. Recitation of **kaddish** by those not obligated to do so blurs an important distinction between the mourner and everyone else. On the other hand, where no one else is available or willing to recite **kaddish**, a friend or family member may choose to do so. The idea is to respect the boundaries that the tradition has established for us—they are there for a reason—while acknowledging the many vagaries of life which compel us to adapt the tradition to certain circumstances.

SHELOSHIM THE FIRST YEAR

All of our Jewish mourning lasts for **sheloshim** [pronounced: **shi-lo-SHEEM**; meaning the first 30 days after burial, including the shivah.] Children who mourn for parents mourn for a year’s time, but this is a variation on the rule which allows them to specifically fulfill the mitzvah of “honor(ing) your father and your mother” (Exodus 20:12). During **sheloshim**, and after the shivah, mourners return to work and normal activities but refrain from public entertainment, listening to music, or social activities. In place of home services, mourners attend the synagogue to recite **kaddish**.

SHANAH THE FIRST YEAR

Children who mourn parents do so for a year. There are stricter and less strict ways of handling this period. It is, first of all, a big mitzvah to attend services daily to recite kaddish. Some may choose to attend no public entertainment, musical event, or social activities for the entire year. Clearly, mourners are given a ready reason for not attending any social gathering that they feel

would be disrespectful to the memory of the parent they mourn. And they should feel no compunction about using that reason during the year of mourning.

Kaddish is recited for a year, though the more common tradition is to recite it for eleven months. The reason for this has to do with a medieval conception of the **kaddish's** function. It was thought that **kaddish** helped the deceased move into the highest heaven. The only thing preventing that soul from entering the highest heaven would be the sins it accumulated while on earth. It was thought that the most wretched people would require a full year to cleanse their souls. Children thus stop reciting **kaddish** after eleven months so as to not inadvertently suggest that their parent was among the most wretched who require a full year's cleansing. For those who choose to say **kaddish** in memory of a parent for a full year—it is, nevertheless, meritorious!

Yahrzeit Anniversary of the Death

The **kaddish** is recited each year on the anniversary of death (not of burial) on a day known by the Yiddish word **Yahrzeit**. A special 24 hour Yahrzeit candle, available at most grocery stores, kosher butcher shops, gift shops, etc. is lit. The Yahrzeit is a traditional time to visit the grave. A charitable contribution is generally made in memory of the deceased. This act of charity is **tzedakkah** [pronounced **tzi-da-KA**; meaning: righteousness] and is one of the most important mitzvot in the Jewish tradition.

Yizkor Memorial Service

This special memorial service known as **Yizkor** [pronounced: **yeez-KOR**; meaning: remember] is recited on Yom Kippur, Shemini Atzeret, and the last day of Pesach and Shavout. Attending a synagogue service on these occasions allows for the recitation of the kaddish. A tzedakkah contribution is again appropriate.

Nihum Aveilim Comforting the Bereaved

Condolence Calls

Condolence calls should be made after the funerals, during the week of shivah, except on Shabbat. The most important form of consolation is just “being there” for the mourner. The second most important form is attentive listening. It is important to provide an opportunity for dear ones to grasp what is happening and so express their concerns. Laughter is not inappropriate in the shivah home, for humor can lift the spirits and bring much needed relief from sorrow. But the laughter must be balanced with ample opportunity for the mourners to reflect and ponder their loss. Shivah can be exhausting for the mourners so keep your visit brief and don't stay late.

Personal Coping

Giving comfort to mourners over an extended period of time is understandably hard to do. Our willingness to address our own discomfort and discouragement will be necessary if we are to succeed. No one of us can reasonably assume total responsibility for a dear one's recovery after a traumatic loss. To be fully effective, a comforter must recognize and value the potential

contribution of clergy, social service and health professionals to the welfare of those who have suffered a loss.

JEWISH BELIEFS ABOUT THE AFTER LIFE

In *Emet Ve-Emunah*, the first statement of the principles of Conservative Judaism, published in 1988, we read: “For the individual human being, we affirm that death does not mean extinction and oblivion. This conviction is articulated in our tradition in the two doctrines of the bodily resurrection of the dead and the continuing existence, after death and through eternity of this individual soul.”

TEHIYAT HAMEITIM BODILY RESURRECTION

The doctrine of *tehyat hameitim* [pronounced; **ti-hee-YAT ha-may-TEEM**; meaning: resurrection of the dead], often identified in error as Christian in origin, is a belief firmly based in Jewish tradition. Some understand the doctrine literally while others see its truth in the continuation of our genetic make-up through the lives of our children. It is a solid article of the Jewish faith to believe that not only is there a part of us that is eternal, namely the soul (see the next paragraph), but that the part of us which is ephemeral, the body, will also be recreated and rejoined with the soul at some time in the future. This idea is quintessentially Jewish in that it sees the soul and body as distinct, yet inextricably tied to each other. When we take care of our bodies, we do our souls a favor. When we take care of our souls, we do our bodies a favor. The two are intertwined.

NESHAMAH SOUL

The belief that there is something within each human being which is both indestructible and immortal is a perfectly legitimate Conservative Jewish belief. The *neshamah* [pronounced **ni-sha-MA**; meaning: soul] is that part of us which is Godly. The spark of God is within us and is therefore a part of us that can never die. As such, death may be viewed as both an end and a beginning—the end of this life, but the beginning of a new life in another dimension of the universe.

HEAVEN

Because Judaism has a definite “here-and-now-”orientation, extensive speculation about heaven never figured prominently in the rabbinic literature. Then again, there is no way to deny the legitimate basis for belief in heaven as part of the Jewish tradition. Where such a belief brings comfort to the mourner, we should not pooh-pooh its validity. In the words of *Emet Ve-Emunah*: “In sum, if God is truly God, if His power is the ultimate fact in this world, His ability to touch us is not cut off by the grave.”

