

Jewish Funeral and Memorial Services

A Guide to Honoring Your Loved One with Dignity and Tradition



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A Word from Rabbi Amy

"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted; God delivers those whose spirit is crushed. Psalm 34:18

Losing someone we love is one of life's most profound challenges. In these difficult moments, Jewish tradition offers us a framework, not to diminish our grief, but to hold us as we mourn, to honor the life that has ended, and to guide us toward healing.

For over 3,000 years, Jewish mourning practices have provided structure, meaning, and comfort to grieving families.

These rituals acknowledge the reality of death while affirming the enduring significance of every human life. They give us permission to mourn while surrounding us with community support.

Whether your loved one was deeply observant or lived at a distance from Jewish practice, whether your family follows tradition closely or approaches Judaism more personally, The Neshamah Institute is here to help you create a meaningful farewell.

Every funeral and memorial service I conduct is personalized to honor the unique life of the person who has died.

This guide will walk you through Jewish mourning traditions from the moment of death through the year beyond.

Please know that I'm available to answer questions, provide support, and help you navigate this journey with compassion and understanding.

May the memory of your loved one be a blessing.

With deepest sympathy,
Rabbi Amy Rader

When Death Occurs: Immediate Steps

Jewish tradition moves swiftly after death, showing respect for the deceased while supporting the mourners. Here's what to do in the first hours.

Immediate Actions

- **Call Rabbi Rader:** She will guide you through every step and begin planning the funeral service
- **Contact a funeral home:** Jewish funeral homes understand our traditions and timelines. I can recommend local funeral homes familiar with Jewish practice
- **Notify close family:** Begin calling immediate family members and closest friends
- **Determine burial preferences:** If your loved one had pre-arranged plans or expressed wishes, share these with the funeral director
- **Consider timing:** Jewish tradition calls for burial within 24 hours when possible, though this is often extended to accommodate family travel and Shabbat/holiday considerations

Aninut: The Period Before Burial

From the moment of death until burial, the family is in a state called aninut.

During this time, mourners are excused from all positive religious obligations—no need to pray, observe Shabbat rituals, or fulfill other commandments.

This exemption recognizes that your entire focus should be on honoring the deceased and preparing for the funeral.

Shmirah: Watching Over the Deceased

Traditional practice includes having someone stay with the body continuously until burial, a practice called shmirah (watching).

The shomer (watcher) may recite Psalms or sit in quiet respect. This honors the dignity of the deceased and ensures they are not left alone.

Many funeral homes can arrange this, or Rabbi Rader can help coordinate volunteers from the community if desired.

What About Autopsy?

Jewish tradition generally discourages autopsy except when required by law or when the findings may save other lives. If an autopsy is legally mandated, it's permissible.

Discuss any concerns with Rabbi Rader and the Medical Examiner's Office.

Before the Funeral

Planning the Service with Rabbi Rader

Rabbi Rader will meet with you (in person or by phone) to learn about your loved one's life, gather stories, and plan a meaningful service.

Please have ready: full Hebrew name if known, dates of birth and death, information about family members, military service if applicable, and any special wishes your loved one expressed.

Together you'll create a service that truly honors their memory.

Taharah: Ritual Purification

Many communities have a chevra kadisha (holy society)—trained volunteers who ritually wash and dress the body in simple white shrouds (tachrichim).

This final act of love, performed with prayers and utmost respect, is considered one of the highest mitzvot because it can never be repaid.

The deceased is treated with the same dignity in death as in life. If you'd like this traditional preparation, Rabbi Rader can help arrange it.

Casket Choices

Jewish tradition emphasizes simplicity and equality in death. A plain wooden casket is traditional, allowing natural return to the earth.

Many Jewish families choose caskets without metal parts.

While elaborate caskets are available, simple pine boxes reflect the value that in death, all are equal before God.

Cremation is discouraged in traditional Judaism but increasingly accepted in liberal communities. Discuss with Rabbi Rader if you have any questions.

Flowers and Donations

Traditional Jewish funerals don't include flowers; instead, donations to charity honor the deceased.

Families may designate a specific charity or cause that mattered to their loved one.

Consider organizations related to health research, Jewish causes, or the deceased's passions.

What to Wear

Mourners and attendees typically dress conservatively in dark, modest clothing.

Avoid bright colors and flashy jewelry. Men often wear a kippah (head covering).

The focus is on respect and dignity, not fashion.

The Funeral Service

Jewish funerals are marked by their honesty, simplicity, and focus on honoring the deceased.

They typically last 20-30 minutes and include the following elements.

Keriah: The Tearing of Garments

Before or at the beginning of the service, immediate family members participate in keriah, the ritual tearing of clothing or a black ribbon worn over the heart (for parents) or other side (for other relatives).

This ancient practice gives physical expression to grief, something inside us is torn, and this ritual acknowledges that reality.

As the ribbon or garment is cut, we recite:

"Baruch Dayan HaEmet—Blessed is the True Judge."

Elements of the Funeral Service

Every funeral Rabbi Rader conduct is personalized, but typically includes:

- **Opening Words:** Rabbi welcomes guests and set the sacred tone for this moment
- **Psalm 23:** 'The Lord is my shepherd...' This beloved psalm offers comfort and trust
- **Additional Psalms or Readings:** Selected passages that speak to loss, comfort, and memory

- **El Maleh Rachamim:** The memorial prayer asking God to shelter the soul of the deceased
- **Hesped (Eulogy):** Rabbi Rader will share stories and reflections about your loved one's life, based on what family shares with me. Family members may also speak if they wish
- **Personal Stories:** Opportunity for family and friends to share memories (if desired)
- **Additional Prayers:** Prayers for peace, comfort, and healing
- **Closing:** Final words before proceeding to the cemetery

The Eulogy

The hesped (eulogy) is a sacred responsibility. Rabbi Rader crafts each eulogy personally after meeting with family, listening to your stories, and learning about the unique person who has died.

The eulogy should capture the essence of a life, achievements and challenges, joys and struggles, the mark this person left on the world.

If family members wish to speak, we encourage brief, heartfelt remarks of 2- 3 minutes.

It's perfectly acceptable to cry, pause, or have someone else finish reading if emotions overwhelm you.

Open or Closed Casket?

Jewish tradition strongly prefers closed caskets, allowing us to remember the deceased as they lived, not as they appear in death.

This preserves dignity and focuses attention on the person's life and legacy rather than the physical reality of death.

Viewing is generally discouraged but sometimes accommodated before the service.

At the Cemetery

The graveside service is the moment of final farewell. Jewish tradition involves active participation in the burial as a final act of love and respect.

Graveside Prayers

At the graveside, we recite prayers including Tzidduk HaDin (affirming God's justice), Psalm 91, and El Maleh Rachamim again.

These prayers acknowledge our pain while placing death within the larger context of eternal significance.

Lowering the Casket

In Jewish tradition, the casket is lowered into the ground in the presence of mourners. This moment of finality is painful but important, witnessing the burial helps us accept the reality of death.

Some families wait until after the graveside service to lower the casket privately, but traditional practice includes this as part of the ceremony.

Filling the Grave

One of the most profound moments in Jewish tradition is when mourners and attendees take turns shoveling earth into the grave.

This is considered the ultimate chesed shel emet (true kindness) because the deceased cannot repay it.

We use the back of the shovel and don't pass it hand-to-hand, demonstrating reluctance to complete this sorrowful task.

Everyone present is encouraged to participate, even briefly.

Kaddish

After burial, mourners recite Kaddish, the mourner's prayer. This ancient Aramaic prayer never mentions death. Instead, it praises God and prays for peace.

Kaddish transforms grief into sanctification, affirming life even in death's presence.

Family members recite this prayer daily during shiva and regularly for eleven months (for parents) or thirty days (for other relatives).

Forming Two Lines

As mourners leave the cemetery, attendees form two lines creating a path for the family to walk through.

As the mourners pass, we offer the traditional words of comfort:

"HaMakom yenachem etchem betoch she'ar avelei Tzion v'Yerushalayim
May God comfort you among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem."

This places individual grief within the larger story of the Jewish people and offers communal support.

Hand Washing

Upon leaving the cemetery, mourners wash their hands from a pitcher of water, traditionally without drying them.

This ritual cleansing marks the transition from the cemetery to home, from death back to life.

It's both a spiritual purification and a symbolic return to living.

After the Funeral

Shiva

Shiva (literally "seven") is the seven-day mourning period immediately following burial.

This time is set aside for the family to grieve, receive comfort, and begin healing while the community surrounds them with support.

When Shiva Begins

Shiva begins immediately after returning from the cemetery. It's suspended for Shabbat (though mourners still avoid public gatherings) and interrupted entirely by major Jewish holidays.

Rabbi Rader will help you navigate the calendar if holidays fall during your shiva period.

The Meal of Condolence

The first meal after burial is prepared by others: friends, neighbors, or community members.

Mourners should not prepare their own food at this moment.

Traditionally, this meal includes round foods like eggs and bagels, symbolizing the cycle of life.

The community's provision of food shows mourners they're not alone and relieves them of daily concerns.

Shiva Practices

During the seven days of shiva, mourners traditionally:

- **Stay home from work:** Take time away from regular responsibilities to focus on mourning grief
- **Sit on low chairs:** Sitting lower than usual physically expresses being 'brought low' by
- **Cover mirrors:** This removes focus from appearance and vanity during mourning
- **Avoid entertainment:** No music, TV, or celebrations, this time is for reflection
- **Refrain from bathing for pleasure:** Basic hygiene is permitted, but luxury bathing waits
- **Don't wear leather shoes:** Leather represents comfort; mourning is uncomfortable
- **Avoid haircuts and shaving:** Personal grooming can wait; appearance is secondary
- **Don't study Torah (except texts about mourning):** Torah study brings joy; shiva is for sorrow
- **Keep a candle burning:** A seven-day memorial candle burns continuously

Many families observe some traditions while adapting others to their needs. The goal is meaningful mourning, not rigid rule-following.

Shiva Minyan Services

Morning and evening prayer services are held at the shiva house, allowing mourners to recite Kaddish in community.

These brief services bring comfort, structure, and support.

Rabbi Rader can help arrange minyanim (prayer quorums) and lead services at your home.

Services typically last 20-30 minutes and include psalms, prayers, and Mourner's Kaddish.

Visiting During Shiva

Friends and community members visit during shiva to offer comfort.

Visitors should follow the mourners' lead. Sometimes they want to talk about the deceased, sometimes they need distraction, sometimes they simply need presence.

Traditional practice suggests waiting for mourners to speak first.

Bring food, share memories, listen more than you talk.

Your presence matters more than your words.

Modified Shiva

Many families observe shortened shiva (three days) or adapt practices to their circumstances.

If you need to return to work, you can sit shiva in the evenings.

The key is creating intentional time and space for mourning while balancing modern life's realities. We'll work together to create a shiva experience that's both meaningful and manageable

Ongoing Mourning

Sheloshim and Beyond

Shiva ends, but mourning continues in graduated stages, acknowledging that grief doesn't disappear overnight.

Sheloshim: The First Thirty Days

Sheloshim (thirty) marks the first month after death.

During this time, mourners gradually reenter normal life but still avoid celebrations, parties, and entertainment.

Haircuts and new clothes are traditionally delayed.

For relatives other than parents, formal mourning concludes after sheloshim.

Continue reciting Kaddish during this time.

Twelve Months: Mourning a Parent

When mourning a parent, formal mourning extends to twelve months (actually eleven months of Kaddish recitation).

This recognizes the unique parent-child bond.

During this year, mourners attend services to recite Kaddish daily or at least on Shabbat and holidays.

Celebrations are generally avoided for twelve months.

This extended period allows deep grief to gradually soften.

Saying Kaddish

Reciting Kaddish provides structure, brings you into community, and honors the deceased.

Many mourners find the daily ritual of Kaddish deeply comforting.

You don't need to attend every single service; do what's meaningful and manageable. If you can't attend services, there are online minyanim and resources.

The Neshamah Institute welcomes you to our services during your mourning period.

Yahrzeit and Yizkor: Remembering

Yahrzeit: The Anniversary

Yahrzeit (literally "year's time" in Yiddish) is the Hebrew date of the anniversary of death.

Each year on this date, we light a 24-hour memorial candle, attend services to recite Kaddish, and remember our loved one.

Many people also visit the grave, give charity, or study Torah in their memory. Yahrzeit transforms a day of loss into a day of active remembrance and honor.

Rabbi Rader will help calculate the Hebrew date and provide annual reminders.

Since the Hebrew calendar differs from the civil calendar, the yahrzeit date shifts each year on the secular calendar.

Yizkor: Communal Memorial Service

Four times a year: Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot Jewish communities hold Yizkor (memorial) services.

During these services, we remember all who have died and recite prayers for the elevation of their souls.

Yizkor connects individual loss to communal memory and reminds us that death touches everyone.

Attending Yizkor services keeps your loved one's memory alive within the larger Jewish story.

Memorial Services Unweilings

Memorial Services

Sometimes families hold memorial services instead of or in addition to funerals—perhaps when burial occurred privately, far away, or under difficult circumstances.

Memorial services celebrate the person's life through stories, photos, music, and community gathering. These services offer closure and communal support.

Rabbi Rader is happy to create a meaningful memorial service that honors your loved one.

Unweilings

Unveiling the Headstone

The unveiling ceremony dedicates the headstone, typically held between one month and one year after death.

This brief graveside ceremony includes:

- Gathering at the grave
- Removing the cloth covering the stone
- Reading psalms and prayers
- Sharing memories or reflections
- Reciting El Maleh Rachamim and Kaddish
- Placing stones on the headstone

The unveiling provides closure, marking the grave permanently while creating an opportunity for family to gather again.

It's often held near the first *yahrzeit*.

The ceremony usually lasts 15-20 minutes.

Visiting the Grave

Jewish tradition encourages visiting graves to remember the deceased and find comfort. We place small stones on the headstone as a sign of our visit, a permanent marker that shows someone was here, someone remembered.

Many people visit before High Holy Days, on *yahrzeit*, or whenever they need to feel close to their loved one.

The grave is a place for prayer, reflection, and connection.

Comforting the Mourners

Nichum aveilim - comforting mourners - is a sacred obligation in Judaism.

If you're supporting someone in grief:

- **Be present:** Your presence matters more than perfect words. Sit with them in silence if needed
- **Listen:** Let mourners share memories, cry, express anger or confusion. Don't try to fix their pain
- **Avoid platitudes:** 'They're in a better place' or 'Everything happens for a reason' often hurt rather than help
- **Bring food:** Practical support like meals, groceries, or household help offers concrete comfort
- **Share memories:** Stories about the deceased bring comfort and keep memory alive
- **Respect their process:** Everyone grieves differently. Don't judge how others mourn
- **Follow up:** Call or visit after shiva ends. Grief doesn't disappear when the formal mourning period concludes
- **Remember anniversaries:** Reach out on yahrzeit, birthdays, or holidays. These are often hardest times
- **Say their name:** Don't avoid mentioning the deceased. Mourners want to talk about their loved one

- **Offer specific help:** 'I'm bringing dinner Tuesday' works better than 'Let me know if you need anything'

What to say: The traditional phrase 'HaMakom yenachem etchem betoch she'ar avelei Tzion v'Yerushalayim' (May God comfort you among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem) places individual grief within the larger Jewish experience.

Simply saying 'I'm so sorry' or 'May their memory be a blessing' also offers comfort.

Sometimes 'I don't know what to say' is the most honest response.

Frequently Asked Questions

How quickly must the funeral occur?

Jewish tradition prefers burial within 24 hours of death when possible, showing respect for the deceased.

However, this is often extended to 2-3 days to accommodate family travel, Shabbat, holidays, or logistical needs. Rabbi Rader can help you balance traditional timing with practical realities.

What about cremation?

Traditional Jewish law prohibits cremation, viewing it as disrespectful to the body and preventing natural return to earth. However, many Reform and some Conservative Jews accept cremation.

If your family chooses cremation, Rabbi Rader can still conduct a meaningful service.

We'll discuss this sensitively based on your loved one's wishes and family values.

Can non-Jews attend Jewish funerals?

Absolutely.

Jewish funerals welcome all who want to pay respects. Non-Jewish guests should dress modestly, follow the family's lead, and participate in rituals as comfortable (like shoveling earth).

Who can say Kaddish?

Traditionally, only Jewish mourners recite Kaddish.

However, practices vary. In liberal communities, anyone mourning may say Kaddish. Rabbi Rader welcomes all who are grieving to participate in ways that bring comfort.

What if my loved one was not religious?

Every life deserves honor, regardless of religious observance. Rabbi Rader conducts meaningful services for Jews of all backgrounds - from deeply observant to completely secular.

We'll create a service reflecting who your loved one was, incorporating as much or as little tradition as feels appropriate.

Can we have music at the funeral?

Traditional Jewish funerals don't include music, maintaining a solemn atmosphere.

However, some families include meaningful songs or instrumental music.

You can discuss with Rabbi Rader what feels right for your family while respecting the seriousness of the occasion.

What if the death was traumatic or by suicide?

Jewish tradition treats all deaths with equal respect and compassion. No matter the circumstances, your loved one deserves a dignified funeral and proper mourning.

Rabbi Rader approaches these situations with sensitivity, without judgment.

Jewish law and contemporary understanding recognize that suicide often results from illness, not sin. You and your loved one deserve full communal support.

Should children attend funerals?

This depends on the child's age, maturity, and relationship to the deceased. Funerals can help children process death and say goodbye.

Prepare them for what they'll see and hear, and have another adult available to step out with them if needed.

Children's grief is real and deserves acknowledgement.

How do I notify the community?

The Funeral Home or Rabbi Rader can help you write and distribute an obituary.

Notify your synagogue or Jewish community organization, which will spread word and often organize meal trains and support.

The funeral home can also place obituaries in local newspapers and online. Rabbi Rader will support you through these practical steps.

Glossary of Terms

Aninut: The period between death and burial when mourners are exempt from religious obligations

Avelut: Jewish mourning practices

Chevra Kadisha: Holy society that prepares the body for burial with ritual washing and dressing

El Maleh Rachamim: Memorial prayer asking God to shelter the soul of the deceased

Hesped: Eulogy honoring the deceased

Kaddish: Mourner's prayer praising God and praying for peace, recited throughout mourning

Keriah: Ritual tearing of garment or ribbon symbolizing the tear in the mourner's heart

Matzevah: Headstone or monument

Nichum Aveilim: The mitzvah of comforting mourners

Shiva: Seven-day intensive mourning period after burial

Sheloshim: Thirty-day mourning period following burial

Shmirah: The practice of watching over the deceased until burial

Tachrichim: Simple white burial shrouds

Taharah: Ritual purification and washing of the body before burial

Tzidduk HaDin: Prayer affirming God's justice recited at burial

Yahrzeit: Annual anniversary of death on the Hebrew calendar

Yizkor: Memorial prayer service held four times yearly

Zichrono/Zichrona livracha: May his/her memory be a blessing (often abbreviated z"l)

Resources and Support

Grief is a journey, and you don't have to walk it alone. Here are resources for support:

The Neshamah Institute

Rabbi Rader and our Neshamah congregation are here for you throughout the mourning process and beyond. Don't hesitate to reach out for guidance, comfort, or just to talk.

Whether you need help with funeral planning, questions about mourning practices, or spiritual support during grief, please call (561) 368-1199 or [email info@niboca.org](mailto:info@niboca.org).

Grief Counseling

Professional grief counseling can provide crucial support. Neshamah can refer you to counselors who understand Jewish perspectives on death and mourning.

Support Groups

Many communities offer grief support groups where mourners can share experiences and find comfort in community.

These groups remind you that you're not alone. Neshamah can connect you with local and online grief support resources.

Jewish Family Services

Jewish Family Services organizations throughout South Florida offer counseling, support groups, and practical assistance during mourning. They provide services regardless of ability to pay.

Contact Information

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May God remember the soul of our beloved who has gone to eternal rest.

May their soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life.

May they rest in peace.

May the memory of your loved one be for a blessing.