

Jewish Mourning Customs (provided by Melbourne Chevra Kadisha)

Introduction

One of the primary purposes of the mourning customs is to help the mourners find a proper balance between their need to mourn and the necessity that Jewish tradition sees in returning to everyday living. Customs of mourning guide the mourners in appropriate behavior at a time of grief and despair and help ease their confusion and doubts. As time passes, the expectation and hope is that people recover from their overwhelming grief, return to their routine, and require less and less external direction.

Jewish tradition divides the time of mourning into four distinct periods, based on how much time has elapsed since the death. Mourning customs are diminished in each successive period:

- a. *Aninut* – between death and burial
- b. *The Shiva* – the first week after burial
- c. *The Shloshim* – the first month after burial
- d. *The year* – the first year after burial
- e. *The anniversary of the death (yahrzeit)* is then observed annually, on the Hebrew date of death.

The mourning period varies depending on the nature of the relationship of the mourner to the deceased: one mourns parents for an entire year, and other relatives for thirty days.

The customs of mourning are many and varied, and differ from community to community. In this booklet, we emphasize the more commonly accepted customs.

a. Aninut

It is customary to light a candle at the time of death, which remains lit for the entire week. This is based on the verse, "For the soul of man is the candle of God" (Prov. 20:27).

The interval between death and burial is known as the period of "*aninut*." This is a period for the immediate family of introspection and of preparing for the funeral. Close family (parents, siblings, children, and spouses) are viewed by Jewish tradition as being preoccupied with the loss, and are thus absolved of traditional Jewish responsibilities such as prayers. Some of the mourning customs are adopted from this moment such as the customs of cutting one's hair, studying *Torah*, or engaging in marital relations. Furthermore, mourners at this stage may not eat meat or drink wine. If the period between death and burial extends over the Shabbat, then these customs are not adopted (except for refraining from marital relations), though they begin again following the *Shabbat*.

b. Shiva

Shiva commences immediately after burial. The mourners return to the house where they will "sit" and do not leave the 'mourning house' the entire week (or as directed by one's Rabbi). The day of the funeral will count as the first day of *shiva* even if the burial takes place just before sunset (in Jewish tradition, the day begins and ends at sunset). *Shiva* ends on the morning of the seventh day after burial, after the mourners have completed the morning prayer (*shachris*) and sat for a few minutes.

Community support and comfort

Mourners need not wallow alone in their grief; on the contrary, it is important to share grief with others and surround oneself with friends, family, and fellow mourners. The mourners customarily do not leave the 'shiva house' the entire week, and friends and acquaintances visit there. It is commendable to focus the conversations on the merits of the deceased.

Shiva customs

Immediately upon returning from the cemetery, the mourners partake in a meal, supplied by others (family or friends), called the *se'udat havra'ah*. At this meal, it is customary to eat round foods, such as eggs, lentils, and bagels symbolizing the life cycle.

Jewish tradition prohibits certain activities for the mourner during *shiva*. Throughout the week of *shiva*, mourners do not work. Friends and neighbors may take responsibility for preparing your food, serving it to you, cleaning up, and doing whatever they can to make this period of time easier for you. During this week, tradition discourages bathing, changing or laundering clothing, cutting hair or shaving, applying makeup or cream, wearing leather shoes, cutting nails, engaging in marital relations and participating in joyous events. These practices are based upon minimizing the mourner's joy.

Mourners also do not study *Torah*, except for the portions that deal with mourning, nor do they greet others and inquire about their welfare. Mourners sit only on low benches. Different people regard these customs with varying levels of strictness. Some people spend the entire *shiva* in one house and even in one room, even when the house is small and there are many mourners. Others spend the day together but go home at night. Customs also vary regarding washing and applying ointments. Washing or applying creams for pleasure and wearing new clothes is generally discouraged. Some people, however, rinse, at least in cold water, parts of their body. For hygienic purposes, washing in tepid water is also acceptable.

These practices are not observed on *Shabbat*, with the exception of refraining from marital relations. See below for more details about mourning on *Shabbat*.

Prayer, blessings, and study in the shiva house

In order to enable the mourners to say *Kaddish* with a minyan, some people organize regular prayer services in the house in which the mourners are sitting *shiva*. One must arrange for a *Torah* scroll, prayer books, and kippot, as well as ten men above the age of thirteen who can commit to coming at prayer times. The order of prayer in the mourner's house is standard, but with some additions and omissions. At the end of the service, an extra Mourner's *Kaddish* is added, and Psalm 49 or 16 is recited. If one is unable to conduct prayer services in one's home, one may go to a synagogue in order to say *Kaddish*. It is customary in some mourners' houses to devote the time between the mincha and maariv prayer services to study *Torah*. Any text can be studied, though traditionally mishnayot are chosen (because of the similarity between the words "*mishnah*" and "*neschama*"). Generally, one selects mishnayot, whose initial letters spell out the deceased's first name, ones which deal with life and death, or *mishnayot* 4-7 in chapter 7 of tractate *Mikva'ot* (since its first letters spell out the word *neschama* – soul).

Necessary equipment

One needs to equip the *shiva house* with chairs, memorial candles that will remain lit for the entire week, and – if prayer services will be conducted there – a *Torah* scroll, prayer books, and *kippot*. Some people also set out a charity box, for deceased's soul. These items can generally be borrowed from a communal organization or can be arranged with the Chevra Kadisha.

The door of the house is generally left open during the time when visitors are expected. In order to help visitors locate the correct home, it is customary to hang mourning notices on the front of the building and on the door of the house. If you wish to schedule a “rest period” during the daily shiva schedule, you can also specify on these notices the hours during which you prefer to receive visitors and those in which you want some privacy and rest.

It is customary in many communities that friends and relatives bring food during *shiva*. In some communities (particularly Sephardi communities), full meals are served to the comforters, in others, only light refreshments are served.

Visiting the grave

After sitting for a short time on the seventh day, all those who are present in your home at the time will say to you “Arise from your mourning” (“*kumu me-evleikhem*”) or other comforting verses. You will then stand up, put on your regular shoes, and drive to the cemetery, to the grave of the deceased. You may postpone the visit to the cemetery to later in the day, if it is more convenient for family and friends. At the cemetery, you should have a short ceremony during which certain Psalms (usually Psalms 33, 16, 72, 91, 104, and 130), and verses (from Psalm 119) whose initial letters spell the first name of the deceased and the word *neshama* (soul) are recited. This ceremony is concluded with the recitation of the Mourner's *Kaddish* (provided there is a minyan) and the prayer *El Malei Rachamim*. After the ceremony, it is appropriate to share personal thoughts and memories, if the family wishes.

Proper conduct when visiting mourners

- Visiting days: If you aren't a close relative or friend of the mourners or deceased, avoid visiting the mourner's home on the first or second day of *shiva*. Allow the mourners time to be by themselves and with their family.
- Visiting hours: Though you may have a very busy schedule, you need be considerate of the mourners – realize that they receive visitors all day long, and they are physically and emotionally worn out. Don't begin your visit after 9 PM. If you are in the mourners' house late at night, consider cutting your visit short. Many families rest between 1 and 4 PM so try not to visit then. If you come to the *shiva* house and see that you are the only visitor, consider returning at a different time so that the mourners can take the opportunity to rest a little. If you see that the mourner is eating, encourage him to continue – you can wait a few minutes for him or return later. Always remember that your objective is to comfort the mourner and not to inconvenience him in any way.
- What to bring: The mourners' families shoulder a heavy burden preparing the food, cleaning the house, taking care of the children, and hosting the visitors, particularly in communities in which all the visitors are served meals. Any food that you cook for them will be greatly appreciated. Try to bring the food in disposable dishes, so that no one will have to bother storing and returning your dishes. If you cannot prepare food that meets the mourners' standards of *kashrut*, consider bringing store-bought food. Bringing flowers to the mourners' house is not practiced in Jewish communities, and may even be viewed as insensitive since flowers are associated with happiness and not with mourning.
- What to say: Certain mourning practices exacerbate the unease that generally characterizes any visit to a mourner's house. Upon entering the mourner's home, the visitor generally does not extend greetings, and must instead find some sort of a substitute – a nod or some other opening line. Orthodox Jewish tradition also suggests that shaking hands, hugging or kissing

mourners is discouraged and that guests not initiate conversation with the mourner, but instead wait for the mourner to start talking to them.

Upon leaving the mourner's house, it is customary to say,

“המקום שאר בתוך אתכם ינחם וירושלים ציון אבלי”

“*Hamakom Yenachem Etchem Betoach She'ar Aveilei Tzion v'Yerushalayim*”

“*May you be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem and know no more sorrow*”.

Mourning on Shabbat and festivals

Shabbat does not terminate the *shiva* period, but mourning is not observed on Shabbat. At the onset of Shabbat, mourners may bathe for hygienic purposes in tepid water, don clean clothes, and leave the house. They express no outward signs of mourning, but all private observances, such as the avoidance of marital relations, stay in effect over Shabbat.

Mourners customarily come to the synagogue on Friday evening after the congregation has sung “*Lecha Dod*”. Before they enter the synagogue, one of the congregants announces their arrival. The congregation rises and makes room for the mourners, who then join the service. On their way to their seats, the congregants comfort the mourners as they would in the *shiva* house.

Unlike Shabbat, some festivals terminate or postpone the *shiva*. If burial takes place before a major festival (*Pesach, Shavuot, Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur or Sukkot*), the festival terminates the *shiva* period completely. If burial, however, takes place during the intermediate days (*hol ha-mo'ed*) of a festival, *shiva* is postponed until the conclusion of the festival, at which time *shiva* is observed for the regular seven days (Consult with your Rabbi re exact timings). *Purim* does not cut short the *shiva* period, though a mourner does change his clothes and leave his house in honor of the holiday.

c. Shloshim

Shloshim – the thirty days of mourning – begins at the time of burial, and not after *shiva* ends, so all mourning practices that relate specifically to the *shloshim* period, practically speaking, apply for only three weeks (after *shiva*) and not four. Some of the mourning practices continue into *shloshim* and some cease with the end of *shiva*. The stricter prohibitions no longer apply, but it is customary to avoid cutting one's hair, shaving, wearing new clothing, cutting nails, attending festive meals or weddings (some people attend the *chuppa* and the brit or pidyon haben ceremony, but not the party), or going to places of entertainment for the entire thirty-day period. Some people also don't wear freshly ironed or festive clothing, bathe in hot water, or listen to any music, even on the radio or television.

Mourners recite the Mourner's *Kaddish* for this entire period so even people who don't regularly pray in a synagogue make sure to do so during *shloshim*. Some people take it upon themselves to wear a *kippa* (or hat) while others light memorial candles during this whole period. If a festival (on which there is a prohibition against work) occurs during *shloshim*, the customs of mourning are cut short, just as they are for *shiva*.

At the end of *shloshim*, the deceased's family visits the grave. Some people erect a tombstone at this point, while others wait until the first anniversary of death. At the grave, it is customary to recite verses from Psalms, the Mourner's *Kaddish* (assuming there is a minyan), and *El Malei Rachamim*.

d. The year (12 months) of mourning

When one is in mourning for one's parents, most of the laws of *shloshim* apply for an entire year (in other words, for an additional eleven months, after *shloshim*). The mourner customarily does not attend festive celebrations or social gatherings, or wear new clothing. The precise practice regarding the shaving or cutting of one's hair can vary: some people extend the prohibition the entire year, while others shave immediately after *shloshim*. Jewish law requires that a man grow his beard wild (in mourning) until 'his friends reprimand him'. Therefore, if one's profession or status requires it, one can already shave when *shloshim* ends. One recites the Mourner's *Kaddish* (and goes to synagogue for this purpose) for 11 months from burial (for 10 months post *shloshim*). At the end of the year of mourning, family and friends visit the grave to conduct a short ceremony and share personal thoughts. In a Jewish leap year, the mourning customs cease after twelve months. Generally the family visits the grave on the anniversary of the death, even though it is thirteen months after the burial.

e. Anniversary (Yahrzeit) and Yizkor days

Every year, on the Hebrew date of death, the deceased's family customarily marks the day and remembers the deceased. It is customary to light a memorial candle that will burn for the entire 24-hour period, to visit the deceased's grave, and to conduct a short ceremony there. The giving of Charity (*Zedaka*) on behalf of the deceased's soul is most important. After visiting the cemetery, the deceased's family usually gets together to share memories, and to learn *Mishnah* (or other texts) for the soul of the deceased. Some people have the custom to be called up to the Torah on the Shabbat or Monday or Thursday before the *yahrzeit*. If you don't know where your loved one is buried, contact the Melbourne Chevra Kadisha. If you are unable either to locate the grave or to travel to it, you can conduct the memorial service in your house or synagogue.

It is customary to recite the *Yizkor* (remembrance) prayers four times each year: on *Yom Kippur*, the last day of *Pesach*, *Shavuot*, and *Simchat Torah*, after the *Torah* reading and before the *Mussaf* service. In these prayers, we remember both those for whom the entire congregation mourns – martyrs of the Holocaust and casualties of Israel's battles – as well as personal relatives who have died. One whose relative has passed away traditionally lights a memorial candle on these days. Some have the custom of waiting a year before reciting *Yizkor* on behalf of the deceased.

In calculating the Hebrew date of death, note that a Jewish day begins at sunset and ends at nightfall the following day (and not at midnight). If the deceased died, therefore, in the evening or night, his date of death will correspond to the Hebrew date of the following day.