

Finding Comfort, Giving Support

**A Guide to Mourning at
Congregation Dorshei Tzedek**



Introduction

While it can be uncomfortable to contemplate the idea of one's own or loved ones' deaths, often a little preparation and thought goes a long way toward making a difficult situation less overwhelming. To that end, Congregation Dorshei Tzedek has prepared this Guide as a resource for our member families regarding all aspects of the mourning process - with information about traditional Jewish mourning practices, our practices here at Congregation Dorshei Tzedek (CDT), and practical information including listings of local funeral homes and cemeteries.

We strongly encourage all of our members to plan ahead and to help other family members, especially parents, think about arrangements for all the aspects of death and dying ahead of time. Immediately after a loved one has died is a difficult time to be making decisions. It is helpful to have thought through everything from health care proxies and living wills to burial plots and funeral arrangements. A wonderful resource to help facilitate these decisions is the booklet "A Time to Prepare," available either from Rabbi Toba or from the Union of Reform Judaism Press (www.URJBooksandMusic.com).

When a Loved One Dies

Immediately following a death, the body needs to be attended to and arrangements have to be made with a funeral home and a cemetery. Some of these decisions will be dependent on where the loved one died and where s/he will be buried. If there is no burial plot, the first thing to do is to purchase one. If a death is imminent, it is absolutely acceptable to talk to funeral homes beforehand (a funeral home is also able to facilitate moving the body from one locale to another, if burial is to be out of town).

If you need help coordinating funeral arrangements and/or *shivah*, or if you just have questions or need someone to talk to, please call Rabbi Toba Spitzer at any time. You can reach her at the CDT office, 617-965-0330, or at home (listed in the members' directory), or via email at rabbi@dorsheitzedek.org.

Cemeteries

There are many Jewish cemeteries in our area. In recent years, CDT members have used Sharon Memorial Park in Sharon, MA and the Baker Street Jewish Cemeteries in West Roxbury. Additionally, in the past few years there has been a movement to create a space where non-Jewish spouses can be buried with their Jewish partners, and several CDT families have bought plots in one such cemetery, Beit Olam East, in Wayland, MA.

Information about these and other Jewish cemeteries in Massachusetts can be found through the following organization:

Jewish Cemetery Association of Massachusetts (www.icam.org)
Telephone: 617-244-6509 or Toll Free: 800-752-JCAM

Funeral Homes

A Jewish funeral home will take care of the details and can answer most of your questions having to do with disposition of the body of the deceased and the Jewish traditions surrounding preparation for burial. If you are planning a burial out of town and do not know a rabbi to perform the funeral, you can ask Rabbi Toba for recommendations and also ask the funeral home in that locale to find a rabbi for you.

Locally, many of the funerals for CDT members and their parents have taken place at Levine Chapels in Brookline:

Levine Chapels in Brookline, MA
www.levinechapels.com
617-277-8300

Other Jewish funeral homes in the area include the following:

Stanetsky Memorial Chapel in Brookline, MA
www.stanetsky.com
617-734-8927

Brezniak-Rodman Funeral Directors in Newton, MA
www.brezniakrodman.com
617-969-0800

A Note about Cremation

Historically, Jewish tradition has held that cremation is unacceptable as an option when a Jewish person dies. Originally this had to do with a sense of the sanctity of and respect for the human body, and perhaps also with an ancient belief that at the “end of times,” there will be bodily resurrection of the dead (in which case the body should be preserved intact). Since the Holocaust, there are, additionally, many who find cremation too reminiscent of the horrifying end of so many Jews under Hitler. Today cremation is no longer taboo for many non-Orthodox Jews, and most Jewish funeral homes will perform cremation. But it is important to know that various traditional practices, such as *tahara*, the ritual washing of the body, are usually not performed for someone who is to be cremated. Another issue that can arise is a disruption of the traditional flow of the Jewish mourning period if there is no burial, or if there is an extended period of time between the death and the memorial service. Please know that your decision to choose cremation will be respected. We suggest you schedule a time to talk to Rabbi Toba if you or a loved one are considering cremation so that we may help around coordinating rituals regarding *shivah*, etc.

Stages of Mourning

Traditional Jewish mourning practices are intended to both honor the memory of the deceased as well as support mourners in their grief. The Jewish grief cycle is based on a deep understanding of the psychology of the mourning process. These traditions help us confront our loss, and creates a context of community and a structure for acknowledging and moving through grief. Jewish mourning practices also value balance and moderation, ensuring that the mourner does not become too enmeshed in his/her grieving while creating opportunities for mourners to assemble, remember and grieve together. **The five named periods of mourning in the Jewish tradition are: *aninut*, *shiva*, *sheloshim*, year of mourning, and *yizkor/yahrzeit*.**

Aninut

Aninut is the time before the burial has taken place. Traditionally, this is a time when only family and very close friends attend to the

mourners. *Aninut* allows the newly-bereft time and space to grieve privately and to begin to make preparations for the funeral. During this period, mourners have no obligations other than planning for the funeral. If the funeral is to be local, Rabbi Toba will visit with the mourners to discuss plans for the funeral and *shivah*.

According to tradition, the funeral and burial happen as quickly as possible, usually within 48 hours of the death. The period of *Aninut* ends at the burial, when *Kaddish* is recited.

Aninut is also the time period during which the community makes plans to help the family in mourning. The rabbi together with members of the Chesed committee will coordinate food and other arrangements. The congregation can make a congregant available, if the family wishes, to stay at the house of mourning while the family attends the service and burial, providing peace of mind that someone has been in the house keeping an eye on things during the funeral.

Preparing the Body for Burial

Once the body arrives at the funeral home, it comes into the care of the *chevrah kaddisha* (literally a ‘holy society’ made up of men to care for male bodies and women for female). The deceased is washed clean, nail polish is removed, etc., with the intention that the body is as it was when it arrived in the world. The *chevrah kaddisha* follow a prescribed set of steps, including the recitation of Biblical verses in praise of the body and a ritual pouring of water over the body. The body is dried and dressed in white linen or cotton and the head is covered. Earth from the land of Israel is often placed in the casket with the body, along with the person’s *tallit*, if s/he wishes to be buried with it. Traditionally, Jews are buried in plain pine caskets, to ensure that funeral costs are kept affordable and to emphasize that we are all equal in death.

Shmirah

Traditionally, from the time of death until burial, the body is never left unattended. During this time, someone (or a series of people) sit in the vicinity of the deceased, doing the mitzvah of *shmirah*, or guarding. It is traditional to read Psalms aloud, or recite poetry or other material that the person may have loved. As a congregation, we perform this

mitzvah for CDT members who have passed away. Acting as a *shomer* is a powerful experience, and a beautiful way of supporting the grieving family. If you have lost a loved one who is not a member of CDT and would like to ensure that this practice is in place, you can request that the funeral home you are using provide someone to do *shmirah*. Most Jewish funeral homes provide this service upon request.

Shivah

Shivah begins immediately after the body is interred. The root of the word *shivah* means “seven,” and refers to the seven days during which, traditionally, a mourner does not leave his/her home and attends fully to the process of grieving. For the purposes of *shivah*, a mourner is technically an immediate relative of the deceased - a parent, child, spouse, or sibling. But CDT members have chosen to sit *shivah* for other family members, including grandparents, stepparents, and aunts and uncles. **If you are Jewish but are mourning a non-Jewish family member** (e.g. a parent or spouse), **it is completely acceptable - and indeed, encouraged - that you observe *shivah***, although it is not required. (For non-Jewish members, please see the section on “Mourning and Non-Jewish CDT Members” on page 10.)

In traditional Jewish communities, because mourners are confined to their home for the week of *shivah*, the community comes to them for daily prayer gatherings and the recitation of Mourners’ *Kaddish*. In our community, the week of *shivah* allows the congregation to support our members who are in mourning and to similarly give them opportunities to say *Kaddish*. The *Kaddish* is said only in the presence of a *minyan*, a quorum of ten adult Jews, thus making it not only a nice gesture, but a loving obligation - a *mitzvah* - to attend a *shivah minyan*. **When you are organizing a *shivah minyan* at your home, you can discuss with the rabbi how many *minyanim* you would like to have during the *shivah* period.** We usually do a few evening services, which include singing, prayers and poems, and most importantly, a time to share memories and stories about the deceased. The congregation will provide service leaders and *siddurim*/prayerbooks, and the Chesed committee will help coordinate food. A *shivah* candle, which burns for seven days, is usually provided by the funeral home, but we also have a supply at CDT.

Shivah is a space in time for people who have recently lost someone to give over to grief and be supported by the community. It is a time to stop the usual routine and just “be.” It is a time to receive help, to receive visitors and food, and to also take a break from work, media, and other distractions. For people who have been nursing a loved one, it is a time to rest and restore; for those who have lost someone suddenly, it is a time to begin to come to the awareness of loss. Even if one chooses not to have people gather for services, we encourage mourners to take the time of *shivah* for their own use. **A mourner sitting *shivah* is not a host**, and should not need to worry about greeting or feeding people; rather, it is s/he who is being held and supported.

Sitting for the full seven days is a powerful experience, but not everyone chooses to do so. Some people choose to sit for fewer days depending on the family’s situation. Often, with families more spread out geographically, some part of the *shivah* is done where the loved one lived and the remaining days here where the congregant has other family and community. The last day of sitting *shivah*, whether it is the third or seventh day, ends in the morning . One tradition is to take a walk around the block on the final morning, accompanied by a few friends, as a symbolic way of returning to the world. This can be a very moving experience for both the mourner and the people participating. Walking together with community lets the person know that even though s/he is still grieving, others are with him/her on that journey.

Sheloshim

Sheloshim means “thirty” in Hebrew and marks the 30 days of mourning from the day of the burial. In the weeks following *shivah*, the mourner begins to return to daily life but is not expected to be “back to normal.” During the *sheloshim* (and for 11 months for parents), the mourner traditionally says *Kaddish* every day in a *minyan*. During *sheloshim*, people go back to work and a more normal routine, but often refrain from attending festivities with live music; traditionally one refrains from getting a haircut (and for men, from shaving) during this period. On some occasions, CDT members have marked the end of *sheloshim* with a service. *Sheloshim* is often used by Dorshei Tzedek members as an opportunity for congregants who sat *shivah* elsewhere

to share memories and stories about their loved one with their local community. Please be in touch with the rabbi if you would like to arrange such a service.

If you are interested in attending a daily *minyan* either during the *Sheloshim* or for the full 11 months of mourning a parent, many local Conservative congregations offer daily morning and/or evening services. Go to <http://www.synagoguecouncil.org/shuls.asp> to search for local synagogues by town or movement affiliation.

Yahrzeit & Yizkor

Yizkor and Yahrzeit are days of remembrance. Four times a year, on Yom Kippur, Sukkot/Shemini Atzeret, Passover, and Shavuot, there is a *Yizkor* service within that holiday's service.

Yahrzeit is the anniversary of a death in the Jewish calendar (to find the Hebrew date corresponding to the secular, go to www.hebcal.com). On both the *yahrzeit* and for *Yizkor*, a special candle is lit (because Jewish days begin at sundown the previous evening, the candle should be lit at sunset either on the evening before the anniversary of the death, or before the holiday begins). You can purchase a *yahrzeit* candle, which burns for 24 hours, at most supermarkets and in stores specializing in Judaica. While there is no specific liturgy associated with the lighting of the candle, you might want to take out a picture of the person you are remembering, or share a memory of them. At synagogue, it is appropriate to say *Kaddish* for a parent, sibling, spouse, or child during services on the day of the *yahrzeit* (or the nearest Shabbat) or during the *Yizkor* service. We also give congregants the opportunity to list the name(s) of anyone they are remembering in our *Yizkor* Scroll, which is produced each year in time for *Yizkor* on Yom Kippur.

Unveiling refers to the ceremony, held within 6 to 11 months after the burial, when the headstone is dedicated and seen for the first time (it is covered in a cloth and then ceremonially “unveiled”). Mourners gather at the cemetery, usually a small group of family members and close friends, and share memories, as well as readings and a recital of the *El Malei Rachamim* prayer and the Mourners' *Kaddish*. Although it is not necessary to have a rabbi present at the unveiling, Rabbi Toba is

available to work with people to create a meaningful ceremony. There is a tradition of placing a stone on the headstone or on the grave itself to mark one's visit, a practice which can be done anytime you visit a cemetery.

Supporting Mourners: The Role of Community

For the members of Congregation Dorshei Tzedek, *shivah* is an opportunity to provide a nourishing meal, to help make arrangements for services at the mourner's home, and to help with everything from sitting in the house during the funeral to transporting mourners to the airport. **But the most important thing you can do is to show up at a *shivah minyan*.** Whether we ourselves have experienced a loss and know the comfort of being surrounded by others, or whether we have only experienced being a person in the room who makes the prayer possible, when we attend a *shivah minyan* we are fulfilling a vital obligation - to the mourners and the community. While technically it is adult Jews who are "counted" in the traditional *minyan* (the quorum of 10) needed to say the Mourners' *Kaddish*, every member of the community "counts" when it comes to showing support and care for someone who has suffered a loss.

Does this mean you have to go to every *shivah minyan*? No, of course not. But we do hope that all of our members will be able to attend one or two *shivah minyanim* each year, or more if possible. If you are shy or do not want to go by yourself, it is perfectly acceptable to call someone else from CDT and ask them to attend with you. You would be helping someone else do a *mitzvah* - which is a *mitzvah* in and of itself. And if you are unable to visit the mourner during the week of *shivah*, many people appreciate receiving a condolence call in the form of a card, email, or phone message.

Do you have to know the person to go to the *shivah minyan*? For those unfamiliar with Jewish practice, it can feel odd to show up at the house of someone you don't know well (or have never met), at what feels like a very vulnerable time for them. **But rest assured that your presence will be greatly appreciated.** We hear over and over again how touching it is for the mourner when people show up at his/her home - especially those people who aren't even friends or acquaintances.

There is often some confusion and hesitation about what to say to a mourner. Jewish tradition wisely advises that it is inappropriate to ask “How are you?” to someone who has suffered a recent loss. The answer is usually “lousy” (or worse), so why ask? Instead, you can tell the person that you are sorry for his/her loss, or share a memory or story about the deceased if you knew him/her. The tradition also advises us to follow the lead of the mourner. If s/he is comforted simply by your presence, then a hug or sitting silently is fine. If s/he wants to share a story of the deceased, then listen. It is not helpful or appropriate to rationalize the death, attempt to find meaning in it, or minimize the person’s loss. Just being present to a mourner is all that’s asked.

Another resource at CDT is a monthly gathering called **AVELUT** (which means “mourning”), at which CDT members who are in mourning have the opportunity to remember their loved ones and to receive support from others. Whether you have suffered a recent loss, are marking a *yahrzeit*, or simply want support wherever you are in your grieving process, this intimate monthly gathering is a wonderful opportunity to connect with others, to share memories and resources. Times and locations of the **AVELUT** gatherings are announced in the newsletter.

Mourning and Non-Jewish CDT Members

Traditionally, Jewish burial and mourning practices are understood as obligations that are incumbent upon a Jew. From this perspective, these practices do not apply to someone who is not Jewish and thus not subject to such obligations. However, from a Reconstructionist perspective, we know that a non-Jewish person may be very engaged in his/her Jewish community, and that some of the Jewish customs around death and mourning may be meaningful at a time of loss. While it would not be appropriate to do an entirely traditional Jewish funeral service for someone who is not Jewish, if you are planning for your own funeral or the funeral of a loved one who is not Jewish and would like to discuss the ceremony with Rabbi Toba, please be encouraged to do so.

If a non-Jewish member of CDT experiences the death of a spouse who is also a member of the congregation, then the community will join with that person in the process of mourning. If there are children in

the family over the age of bar/bat mitzvah, the obligation of saying *Kaddish* rests upon them. But a non-Jewish parent may want to join them in the prayer, if it feels meaningful. In this scenario, it would be appropriate for the spouse, along with children if they are present, to sit *shivah* for some period of time (either here in the CDT community or with the spouse's family of origin).

When a non-Jewish CDT member loses a parent, there is no prescribed ritual or practice, beyond what might be appropriate in the family member's religious tradition. If it would feel meaningful to participate in some kind of mourning practice here at CDT, please contact Rabbi Toba to discuss options, which might include some version of "sitting *shivah*," giving the mourner the opportunity to share memories of the loved one, and the community the opportunity to offer their condolences.

Additional Resources

To learn more about Jewish burial and mourning practices, these are some helpful guides:

Brener, Anne. [Mourning & Mitzvah: A Guided Journal for Walking the Mourner's Path Through Grief to Healing](#). Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2nd ed., 2001

Diamant, Anita. [Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead, and Mourn as a Jew](#). New York: Schocken Books, 1998

Wolfson, Ron. [A Time to Mourn, a Time to Comfort: A Guide to Jewish Bereavement](#). Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005



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