

# **Matters of Life and Death: A Guide & Resources**

Adapted from *Sacred Pilgrimage: A Guide to Jewish Practice on Death and Mourning*, by Rabbi Richard A. Block, 1996

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***“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me.” Psalm 23:4***

Death is difficult. It is uncomfortable. When a loved one dies, our lives are forever changed, sometimes in profound and complex ways. We struggle with grief; with feelings of sadness, anger, loneliness, powerlessness, and depression. We are forced to face our own mortality. We may feel alone and adrift.

Judaism gives us a way to accept death as an inevitable part of life. We mark death and mourning with a series of rituals and a liturgy that are meant to provide us with tools of comfort, community, strength, and healing to help us get through some of the most difficult moments of our lives. Our ancient traditions can bring us guidance and consolation.

This guide has been created to help you prepare for when the time comes. We hope you will use it as a resource that can help answer questions you may have. Please know that your Temple Sinai clergy and community are here for you to give you, your family, and friends our care and support. We want to do whatever we can to walk with you through the valley. We are with you and here for you.

L'shalom, in peace,  
Your Temple Sinai Clergy and Staff

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# BEFORE DEATH COMES

## Last Will and Testament

Every adult should have a will, a legal document in which one disposes of one's material assets. Some people think of a will as necessary only if there is a large estate or when death is imminent. Such assumptions are mistaken and can have awful consequences. No matter what your age or financial situation, a will relieves your family of the burden of disposing of personal possessions, avoids or minimizes a range of potential problems and complications later, and reduces probate and other costs. Although it is possible to create a legally valid will on your own, consulting an attorney with experience in such matters is the wiser course and is likely to prove the most financially prudent one.

In addition to addressing property and guardianship issues, a will can also specify your desires concerning funeral arrangements and organ donations. However, since the will is normally not consulted until after the funeral, it is imperative to record your wishes separately and to make them known to those who will be responsible for handling the arrangements at the time of death.

## Ethical Will

In contrast to a last will and testament, which disposes of things of material value, an ethical will is a statement to your survivors of the beliefs and values you wish to transmit and perpetuate. It is a mitzvah to prepare an ethical will for the moral guidance of your family, especially for any children. Preparing such a will is not a complicated or technical process. It is as simple as writing a letter to those you love expressing your feelings, advice and hopes for the future. As with other wills, it is advisable to prepare an ethical will when you are strong and healthy. All wills should be left in a safe place that is known to the family. Your clergy would be glad to assist you in creating this document.

## Organ Donation

Reform Judaism encourages organ donation in the hope of saving the life or significantly improving the quality of life of another person or persons. The mitzvah of *pikuach nefesh*, saving life, takes precedence over virtually all other considerations. If you wish to donate organs of your body, you should inform family members, especially those who will be responsible for making funeral arrangements as well as health care decisions, should you be unable to do so. The District of Columbia Department of Motor Vehicles as well as Maryland's Motor Vehicle Administration allow you to elect to be an organ donor when you are receiving or renewing your Drivers License. This will make your wishes known to those who would care for you in the event of an accident. Jewish tradition disallows donation of the body to science, but Reform Judaism permits this practice, provided that the body will be treated with respect and the remains are interred when the study is completed. We suggest you discuss your wishes with family members and the clergy.

## **Autopsy**

Reform Judaism permits autopsies when legally required or so long as they are performed for the clear purpose of increasing medical knowledge that will help others to live. If the deceased has forbidden an autopsy, these instructions should be honored unless an epidemic threatens or they are contrary to law.

## **Burial and Cremation**

Jewish tradition encourages burial as the preferred manner of disposition of the body, in keeping with the belief that "the soul returns to God, its maker; the body returns to the earth from which it came." Reform Jewish practice permits cremation, although traditional Jewish practice does not. Burial remains the practice of a majority of Jews. Ashes may be interred in a cemetery or placed in a mausoleum thereafter. This is preferable to scattering as it provides the survivors with a place where they can feel a special closeness to their loved one.

## **Cemetery Arrangements**

One of the first things any newly established Jewish community does is provide for a Jewish cemetery, thus consecrating the ground for sacred purposes and undertaking to provide perpetual care to the graves of those buried there. This goes back to the patriarch, Abraham, who purchased a burial place for Sarah and his family in ancient times.

The Temple Sinai Cemetery was established in January 2005, after congregants expressed a strong desire to form a relationship with Garden of Remembrance, a not-for-profit community Jewish cemetery, located in Clarksburg, Maryland. By December 2006, our members purchased more than half of the plots in the first sections of The Temple Sinai Cemetery. To ensure that our cemetery would have enough space to serve our congregation into the future, our Board of Trustees exercised an option for additional plots and secured options on additional contiguous areas adjacent to the existing Cemetery areas. Twenty-two congregations (Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Orthodox) currently participate in this unique community-based approach to meeting the needs of the entire Jewish community.

Garden of Remembrance is the only memorial park in the Washington, DC area that permits participating congregations to establish their own rules as to who may be buried there. The Temple Sinai Cemetery is available for the burial of our congregants and their families, including family members who are not Jewish. Plots may also be used for the burial of cremated remains. The Garden of Remembrance coordinates details smoothly with our clergy and staff, and treats all members with the care and dignity they expect and deserve at a moment of great family sorrow.

Without prearrangement, your family and loved ones face the burden and stress of making many important decisions during their time of grief. By taking thoughtful action now, you spare your loved ones from dealing with the logistical

details associated with burial in the future. For additional information, and to discuss the Temple Sinai Cemetery, please feel free to contact our Executive Director Ellen Agler at the temple, (202) 363-6394, x210, [eagler@templesinaidc.org](mailto:eagler@templesinaidc.org). Also, you may contact the chair of our Cemetery Committee, Ted Rosen, at (301) 530-3403, [gted666@gmail.com](mailto:gted666@gmail.com).

Visits to Garden of Remembrance can be made every day except Saturdays and Jewish Holidays. Please call (301) 428-3000 to arrange a visit or email [info@gardenofremembrance.org](mailto:info@gardenofremembrance.org).

## **WHEN DEATH IS IMMINENT**

### **SinaiCares Visits and Services**

SinaiCares has been established as a way for our members to support one another during difficult moments, especially during times of serious illness. SinaiCares is able to arrange visits from members of the congregation and can help to support loved ones with meals, rides, and other services on a case by case basis. Please contact Karen Auerbach, SinaiCares Program Coordinator, at [kauerbach@templesinaidc.org](mailto:kauerbach@templesinaidc.org) if you would like SinaiCares support or are interested in volunteering with SinaiCares.

### **Visiting the sick**

One of the acts that Jewish tradition declares to be both an obligation and a deed whose reward is immeasurable is *bikkur cholim*, visiting the sick. Those with a life-threatening illness have a special need and desire for the support of loved ones and friends. A smile, a kindly touch, a listening ear, caring words and one's physical presence can ease suffering and bring peace. Please inform a member of the clergy if a member of the congregation is seriously ill.

### **Vidui / Confessional Prayer**

A long-standing practice of Judaism is a confessional prayer called *vidui*, recited by or for one who is critically ill, that concludes with the Shema. Those present when death is imminent may help the dying person say these hallowed words or recite them on that person's behalf.

The purpose of the prayer is to enable the dying to reconcile themselves with God by acknowledging and asking forgiveness for past failings. *Vidui* may also bring an opportunity to provide healing and reconciliation between family members who had grown apart or struggled with one another.

# FROM THE TIME OF DEATH TO THE FUNERAL SERVICE

When one has been present at or is informed of a death, the following prayer is customary, along with such other prayers as the heart may prompt:

*Barukh Atah Adonai, Eloheinu, Melekh HaOlam, Dayan HaEmet.*

Blessed are You, Adonai, Our God, Sovereign of the Universe, the true Judge.

## **Kriah / Tearing a Garment**

According to traditional custom, when one learns of the death of a person for whom one is required to observe Jewish mourning rituals (see "Who is a Mourner?" on p.11), one tears a garment one is wearing to symbolize one's grief. Most Reform Jews no longer follow this custom. Some choose to wear a black mourner's ribbon, instead. *Kriah* ribbons will be made available to the mourners before the funeral service.

## **Notifying Temple Sinai**

Please notify Temple Sinai when a loved one has died as soon as possible. You can call the main office at 202-363-6394. If the office is closed, a voice message will instruct you how to contact the clergy "on-call" or Ellen Agler, the Executive Director.

## **Notifying Family Members**

It is a mitzvah to notify all members of the family when a death has occurred, even those who are estranged. If possible, the precious opportunity should be seized to heal wounds by bringing family members together.

## **Visiting the Bereaved Prior to the Funeral**

Unless you are a very close friend or relative, it is best to postpone a visit to the home of the bereaved until after the funeral. Preparations must be made and time taken to begin coping with the loss. There are exceptions, of course, guided by common sense, such as the bringing of food to the family.

## **Activity by the Bereaved**

During the period before the burial, the bereaved do not engage in business or other activities except those required for the funeral or to respond to emergencies. They are in the first, most intense stage of mourning, *ahninoot*, a time when tradition exempts them from all other ritual obligations.

## **The Body**

The body is treated with great respect as the vessel that once contained the soul. By tradition, the body is not left unattended before burial. With candles burning to symbolize the soul's eternal flame, a watchman (*shomer*) sits in attendance and reads Psalms. Most Jews, however, tend to be satisfied with the care of the undertaking establishment. Pre-funeral visitation at the funeral home is not in keeping with Jewish custom. Tradition calls for the body to be ritually washed,

a cleansing called *taharah*, purification, before the body is laid in the earth. This is normally done only by Jewish funeral homes. The body is then dressed in plain white, inexpensive shrouds, emphasizing the principle of equality in death. Some bury loved ones with a *kippah* and a *tallit* with the *tzitzit* cut off as a symbolic recognition of death. Another practice some follow is to place a small sackful of earth from the land of Israel in the casket. This emphasizes the attachment of our people to the holy land, the place where, it was believed, the dead would come back to life in the messianic time.

## **MAKING FUNERAL ARRANGEMENTS**

### **Consulting the Clergy**

When death is imminent or when it occurs, Temple Sinai should be informed as soon as possible. The rabbis and cantors are ready to help you and will make every possible effort to accommodate their schedules to your needs. If you wish them to be involved in the funeral service it is essential to consult them before arrangements have been completed. The rabbis and cantors are available for counsel, advice and help.

### **Cemetery**

If you have not already done so, cemetery arrangements must be made at the time of death. Instructions for doing so are found on p. 5.

### **Funeral Director / *Chevra Kadisha***

At the time of death, family members should contact the funeral home they have chosen. The funeral home will perform such tasks as removing the body of the deceased, obtaining a death certificate, placing obituary notices and preparing the body for burial or cremation. It is normally necessary to meet the funeral director at the funeral home to select a casket and other services and provide for payment if this has not been arranged in advance.

Temple Sinai will work with every funeral home, Jewish or not. We are a member of the Jewish Funeral Practices Committee which has created a pre-arranged package available to all our members. For more information, please visit [www.dc.jewish-funerals.org](http://www.dc.jewish-funerals.org), or you may call (202) 966-1545



## **The Coffin**

The Jewish value of equality in death calls for the avoidance of ostentation and excessive expense in making final arrangements. An elaborate coffin is not required; on the contrary, Jewish tradition discourages this. It prescribes, instead, a simple, all wood casket.

## **Floral displays**

Floral displays are discouraged by Jewish tradition, which favors tzedakah, a charitable contribution to assist the living. Flowers soon fade and wither, but an act of lovingkindness can have a profound and lasting effect.

## **Time and Place of the Services**

Jewish tradition provides that we bury as soon as possible after death, being mindful of travel arrangements for out-of-town mourners. This generally means the second or third day after death occurs. Funerals are never held on the Sabbath or Jewish festivals and are conducted during daylight hours.

Services are generally held at a synagogue, funeral home, or cemetery. When the deceased is a member of Temple Sinai or a close family member of a congregant, the service may be held at the synagogue, in the sanctuary or the Beit Am. When desired by the family, the funeral may take place at a funeral home or be combined with the interment and the entire service held at the cemetery.

## **Children at Funerals**

Children are more aware of death than we may realize, though their understanding of death evolves as they get older. Between the ages of 5 and 9 children generally become able to understand the meaning of physical death and by the time they are 9 or 10 they often have a realistic concept of the finality of death. The ability of children to understand death varies with age and maturity, but regardless of the variables, children cannot be shielded from death or protected from its reality.

Death is a crisis that should be shared by all members of the family. When parents discuss death openly with their children, they enable them to develop a concept of death in a healthy manner. Attendance at the funeral can aid children in understanding the finality of death and in dispelling the greater fears and fantasies that can arise when they are kept away. If they are old enough to attend a synagogue service and comprehend a good part of what is taking place, they should be allowed to attend a religious ceremony to say goodbye to a significant person in their lives. Of course, children should not be forced to attend. If apprehensive children choose to remain at home they should be allowed to do so without being made to feel guilty or neglectful. Parents may visit the cemetery with them at another time. It is very helpful to children to explain to them in advance what is going to take place and the fact that people may be crying. Your clergy are also glad to sit down with you and your children to discuss death and mourning.

# **THE FUNERAL/MEMORIAL SERVICE AND BURIAL/INTERMENT**

One of the rabbis and one of the cantors normally officiates at the service. When requested by the family, a pianist is available to play music at the beginning and end of the service for a nominal fee. The service centers around prayers, psalms and a eulogy in memory of the deceased. Participation by family members or others and the inclusion of additional readings or music should be discussed with the officiants. At the conclusion of the service, it is customary for those in attendance to remain in their places until members of the family have departed and embarked for the cemetery. Jewish tradition requires that the casket remain closed throughout as an expression of respect for the dead. If the bereaved wish to view the body a last time, they should arrange to do so prior to the funeral service.

## **The Burial Service/Interment**

At the cemetery, pallbearers selected by the family, or the funeral director and cemetery personnel, will carry the casket to the grave. Following the recitation of prayers, it is customary for the casket to be lowered. Family members and friends are then invited to place a shovelful or handful of earth in the grave. Those who are not comfortable participating in this portion of the ritual need not do so. Tradition considers participation in the burial to be one of the highest and most selfless mitzvot because it is an act of kindness of which the recipient is unaware and that cannot be repaid. The sound of earth falling on the casket can be jarring, but it helps mourners accept the reality of death and, thus, facilitates the process of healing. After earth has been placed in the grave, the mourners' kaddish is recited and the service concludes.

## **Burial Vaults or Liners**

Neither are prescribed by Jewish tradition and they are not necessary, but are acceptable where required by civil law or cemetery rules.



# AFTER THE FUNERAL AND INTERMENT

## The Meal of Consolation

Following the interment, the mourners normally return to the home of the deceased or another family member. Usually, others who attended the funeral or burial service are invited to join them. Customarily, food and beverages are set out by friends of the bereaved so that they may take nourishment after a physically and emotionally exhausting experience. Several foods are traditionally served, including hard-boiled eggs, which symbolize the Jewish affirmation of life, even in the aftermath of death.

## Other Customs upon Returning from the Cemetery

Some choose to follow the custom of having a container of water and a towel outside the door of the house of mourning. This serves the practical purpose of allowing those whose hands are soiled from participating in the interment to wash their hands before entering the home.

# MOURNING OBSERVANCES

## After Burial

After burial or cremation, attention shifts from paying appropriate respect to the deceased to easing the pain of the living. Jewish traditions and practices define periods of mourning and ways for the bereaved to gradually reenter the stream of life.

## Who is a mourner?

Judaism recognizes that there is a difference between formal rites of mourning and the very personal grief that cannot be regulated. Reform practice recognizes that one may grieve for any dear person, but it is a religious duty to observe the practices of mourning for a parent, spouse, sibling or child. Those under the age of 13 need not observe the mourning customs. Jewish tradition does not call for mourning observances for an infant less than 30 days old, but Reform Judaism recognizes the devastating character of such a loss by providing for mourning rituals in such cases.

## *Shiva* / Seven days of mourning

In Hebrew, the word *shiva* means seven; when used in connection with mourning it connotes the seven day period that commences the day of the funeral. During the *shiva* period, it is customary for mourners to refrain from all ordinary pursuits and occupations and remain at home, except on Shabbat, festivals and the High Holy Days, when they attend synagogue services in order to recite kaddish with the congregation following the reading of the name of the deceased as part of the congregation's memorial list. *Shiva* provides the mourner an opportunity to begin working through grief, to be comforted and interact with good friends and loved ones. Most Reform Jews do not follow the customs of sitting on low stools and covering mirrors at the home of the bereaved during *shiva*.

## The Memorial Candle

Upon returning home from the memorial service or interment, a seven day memorial candle, usually provided by the funeral home, is lit at the home of the bereaved. It should be lit by a mourner as a symbol of the light the deceased brought to friends and loved ones during life. It recalls the biblical teaching, "the human spirit is the light of the Eternal." The candle is lit without reciting a blessing.

## Home Services

Jewish tradition prescribes daily services at home (except for Shabbat and holidays) during the *shiva* period. When mourners are unable to go out to the community, the community comes to them. Members of Temple Sinai follow a variety of practices in this regard. Most have at least one service in the evening on the day of the interment. Some hold services for three days. A few continue to the end of *shiva*. These services are available upon request and are conducted by one of the rabbis or cantors or by a knowledgeable member of the temple, most often around 7 PM.

## Condolence Calls

It is appropriate for friends and members of the temple to visit the home of the bereaved following the burial during the *shiva* period. It is also a kindness to visit or call in the weeks and months after *shiva* when the press of family and friends has begun to give way to loneliness and the full impact of the loss is felt. People are often not sure how to conduct themselves during such a visit. Here are some suggestions:

**You may not be certain what to say.** Jewish tradition encourages visitors to remain silent and wait until the mourner speaks first. There are no words to take away grief. Your presence and acceptance is often more important than advice. Be willing to simply sit in silence, perhaps holding the mourner's hand, sharing a smile, communicating without words your caring and concern.

Allow mourners the opportunity to talk about and express their feelings of loss and the pain of separation from a loved one. Do not attempt to change the subject or divert them from painful, angry or guilty thoughts. If they wish to cry, allow them to do so without discouragement. Tears are not a sign of weakness; they are a healthy and appropriate outlet for grief.

**Listen.** Ask questions that will allow the mourner to talk with you about their grief and their memories of the deceased. *Shiva* is an ideal time for reminiscing and reflecting on the life of the person who has died. Do not hesitate to talk about the deceased. Share your own stories and recollections. Memories are a precious gift to mourners.

**Share your feelings.** The paradox of grief is that the very person who would provide comfort in a time of emotional distress is the one who has died. The person who would hug, hold and console the mourner is no longer available to do so. If you have a close relationship with the bereaved, do not hesitate to hold,

hug or touch them as you would want them to do were the situation reversed. **Show your acceptance.** Grief often makes people feel as if they are losing their minds; it makes them say and do things that are unusual for them. If you can accept them without passing judgment, you will communicate your unconditional care.

**Offer help.** Grief can make daily living a burden. During and following *shiva*, you can assist by providing meals, organizing a *minyán*, car pooling, shopping, running errands or helping the mourner obtain legal advice. Help them, but allow them to remain in charge of their own lives.

**Be patient.** Grief is a process of adapting to change rather than "recovering." Be patient in allowing people to grieve and return to life after *shiva*. It often takes a year or more for a mourner to feel like himself or herself again. It can be difficult to be in the company of a person in acute emotional pain. Your patience and compassion will make a difference in their healing process.

## AFTER SHIVA

### **Sheloshim**

After *shiva*, normal occupations and family activities are resumed. During *sheloshim*, the thirty day period that commences on the day of the funeral, it is customary to refrain from public entertainment and parties with music. It is permissible to plan for and attend such events as a family wedding or bar or bat mitzvah ceremony during this period, but it is traditional to refrain from dancing and exuberant celebration.

### **Kaddish**

Jewish tradition establishes eleven months as the official period of mourning for a parent (thirty days for other close relatives) and calls for daily recitation of the kaddish prayer in memory of the deceased at a public worship service attended by a *minyán*. At Temple Sinai, it is more customary for mourners to attend weekly Shabbat services as often as possible for up to a year, to recite kaddish with the congregation. Some find it comforting to recite kaddish privately when they are unable to attend services at the synagogue.

### **Yizkor**

On Yom Kippur afternoon and the morning of the last day of the three "pilgrim festivals," Sukkot, Passover and Shavuot, a service is held. The service includes a *yizkor* or memorial section with traditional prayers in memory of loved ones. As in the case of the anniversary of death, it is a mitzvah to light a memorial candle at home prior to sundown on eve of each of the four holidays.

### **Cemetery Visits**

It is not customary to visit the cemetery in the month following the funeral. As the intent of this custom is to spare the bereaved the pain such a visit can cause, it

should not be considered an inflexible rule. Thereafter, visitation is unrestricted, but it is not customary to visit on Shabbat or Jewish holidays. The month prior to the High Holy Days is a common and appropriate season for such visits. The tradition of placing a small stone on the grave marker hearkens back to the time when it was a family responsibility to maintain loved one's graves. Today, it testifies that the grave has been visited by those who remember the person buried there.

### **Unveiling/Dedication of the Grave Marker**

Jewish tradition permits the dedication of a headstone or grave marker any time after the end of *sheloshim*. However, it is customary to wait until approximately a year after the death to hold the "unveiling" ceremony, which is so named because the cover is removed from the marker at that time. The ceremony may take place on any day except Shabbat or a Jewish holiday and may be conducted by a rabbi, cantor or a knowledgeable lay person. It often takes about a year to adjust to a loss and to turn to the future with optimism and energy. Should you need assistance, a member of the clergy can help you choose the wording for the grave marker, which should be ordered at least two months before the date of the unveiling ceremony. On that day, the family and dear friends gather at the grave and return home afterward. The cemetery should be notified of the date and time of the unveiling to insure that the gates are open, that the tombstone or marker is in place and that another funeral or unveiling is not scheduled in the immediate vicinity of the grave at that time. The cemetery can refer you to a reputable monument company that can prepare the headstone or marker to your specifications. It is contrary to Jewish tradition to include a portrait of the deceased on the marker.

### **Yahrzeit**

It is customary to observe the yahrzeit or anniversary of the death of a loved one by attending services at the synagogue and reciting kaddish, and by lighting a small yahrzeit candle at home at or near sundown on the eve of the anniversary of the day of death.

These candles can be obtained at most grocery stores. Temple Sinai's custom is to read the name of deceased loved ones of its members at the Shabbat services closest to the date of death. If you cannot be present on the closest Shabbat, please let the office know and we will gladly read the name on a date when you can attend.

For the first yahrzeit of an immediate family member or upon request, a SinaiCares volunteer will deliver a yahrzeit candle to your home.

## RESOURCES

**Temple Sinai**  
3100 Military Road NW  
Washington, DC 20015  
(202) 363-6394  
[office@templesinaidc.org](mailto:office@templesinaidc.org)

**The Temple Sinai Cemetery at the Garden of Remembrance**  
14321 Comus Road  
Clarksburg, Maryland 20871  
(301) 428-3000  
[info@gardenofremembrance.org](mailto:info@gardenofremembrance.org)

**Jewish Funeral Practices Committee of Greater Washington, Inc.**  
4000 Cathedral Avenue NW  
Suite 332B  
Washington DC 20016  
(202) 966-1545

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