

JEWISH DEATH & DYING **PROCEDURES AND PRACTICES**

1. Jewish Views and Beliefs Concerning Death

Judaism believes that every moment of life is precious and of infinite value. We do not consider pain or suffering as mitigating factors that obviate the sanctity or importance of life.

Jews believe in a life after death - the immortality of the soul and the physical resurrection of the body at a time in the future.

2. What To Do Before Death -:

*** *Find out what the person wants***

If the patient and family have already discussed their concerns, refer to them for your guidance. If not, discuss them now and ask them if they would like you to contact their rabbi. If they do not have their own rabbi, or you need more information or direction, please contact JF&CS Chaplaincy Services at 416-638-7800. There is an emergency after hours line, and calls are returned except on the Sabbath or Holy Days.

*** *Last Confessional Prayer***

There are no formal sacramental prayers or “last rites” in Judaism. Nevertheless there are prayers that the patient may want to recite or have someone else recite for them. (See the end of this guide)

*** *Companionship***

According to Jewish law and custom it is very important for the patient not to be left alone to die. Jews believe that death should occur in the midst of a supportive community. Being with one who is dying helps reduce their anxiety, fear and loneliness. If you are unable to remain with the patient, try to arrange for someone else to stay in the room. Certainly the family ought to be contacted and told that their loved one is slipping away. This news will give the family the opportunity to come to the bedside and say goodbye.

*** *Do Nothing That Might Hasten the Dying Process***

Nothing should be done that might, even possibly, accelerate the dying process. For example, the patient should not be moved.

3. Immediately After Death Has Occurred

- * **The family, family's rabbi and doctor are to be called and informed of the death.**
- * **The deceased patient should remain untouched for approximately 30 minutes after death has occurred. Handle the body as little as possible and open a window if there is one in the room.**
- * **When the family arrives, provide them with sufficient time for them to begin the grieving process. Family members may wish to close the eyes and mouth of the deceased and straighten the person's limbs.**
- * **Save any bloodied sheets, clothing, or blood-bearing tubes. Pack them safely and consult with a rabbi as to their ultimate disposal.**
- * **The family may request that the body be lowered to the floor with the body facing Jerusalem.**
- * **Mourners may wish someone to stay with the body and recite Psalms from the moment of death until the burial. The individual performing these rites is a trained individual observant in the Jewish faith.**
- * **Mourners may tear their clothing immediately after death, if it has not occur on the Sabbath or a holiday. This is an expression of grief, indicating that a part of them has been torn away. It is a recognition of their pain and loss. Although this can be done with their hands, it is considerate to have scissors available.**
- * **The best way to demonstrate your condolences is by offering your presence as a good and supportive listener.**

4. Notifying an Orthodox Family of an Imminent Death on the Sabbath

Orthodox families do not answer their telephones on the Sabbath (from Friday evening until Saturday night). When a death is imminent you should try to make arrangements with the family in advance:

- * **Set up a special ring signal (i.e. ring three times and hang up) to indicate that they should walk to the institution.**
- * **suggest to the family that they rent/or buy an answering machine so they can hear the message without picking up the telephone.**

If you are unable to make these arrangements in advance send a messenger, courier, or police to inform the family.

You should consult with the family in advance about what to do should the death actually occur on the Sabbath.

5. Jewish Funeral Homes and Arranging a Funeral

The family should contact the funeral home of their choice.

The two major Jewish funeral homes in Toronto are:

Benjamin's Park Memorial Chapel	416-663-9060
Steeles Memorial Chapel	905-881-6003

The funeral home will not pick up the body on a Jewish holiday or the Sabbath. The body will remain in the morgue until the evening the holiday ends (i.e., if someone dies Saturday morning, the body will remain in the morgue until nightfall Saturday evening).

The Jewish funeral home performs a ritual washing of the body by lay persons, before it is covered in a plain white linen shroud. The shroud symbolizes purity and simplicity.

Burials generally take place as soon as possible after death.

Coffins are constructed of wood to allow for decomposition of the body and its return to dust. Friends of the deceased carry the coffin from the funeral home to the hearse and from the hearse to the burial site.

The values of simplicity and equality dominate the Jewish approach to burial and funeral arrangements.

* Anyone is welcome to attend the funeral.

6. Shiva - The Period of Mourning

Shiva is the Hebrew word meaning "seven" and refers to a seven-day mourning period beginning after the funeral.

Its purpose is to carry the mourners over a painful period until they can resume some degree of normal life. Full attention is devoted to grieving, remembering and mourning the deceased.

During the entire seven days of Shiva, except on the Sabbath, the mourners may not leave the house. Since the family cannot attend prayer services in the synagogue the custom has been for a minyan (a quorum of ten male worshipers) to meet at the house twice daily in order to pray with the bereaved and enable them to say the Kaddish (a special mourner's prayer).

7. Visiting a Shiva House

Friends and family visit the mourning family in their home and offer comfort. A visit from a care giver is always appreciated.

At the Shiva house mirrors may be covered (as mourners should not be concerned with their personal appearance at this time); a candle will usually be burning; and mourners may be sitting on low stools. Further they may not be wearing shoes. All of these items are indications of mourning.

- * Upon arrival it is not proper to offer greetings such as shaking hands or initiating the offering of condolences. The mourner should be the one to address the visitors. This may provide significant clues as to the mourner's concerns and state of emotional being.
- * While visiting, allow the mourner to begin the conversation and to express whatever (s)he feels. If you are not certain what to say, be silent and wait until the mourner speaks first.
- * Upon leaving the house at the end of your visit, one now offers condolences. The standard Jewish form of expression is to say the following: "May G-d Almighty comfort you together with all of the other mourners for Zion and Jerusalem".

8. Other Mourning Customs

Shloshim After the seven days of mourning, there is a period called Shloshim during which the mourner returns to work but does not attend parties or any other form of public entertainment or celebration. The word Shloshim means "thirty" in Hebrew and indicates that this time period lasts thirty days after the burial. For someone who has lost a parent, this period extends to twelve months.

Kaddish Kaddish is a prayer affirming G-d's justice and the meaningfulness of life. It is recited daily by one who has lost a parent for eleven months and for thirty days by one who has lost another close relative.

Yahrzeit This is the anniversary of the death of an immediate family member. It is observed each year by lighting a 24-hour memorial candle, saying the Kaddish, donating charity and studying the Torah.

Yizkor Yizkor is a religious service in memory of the dead which occurs during four Jewish holidays: Yom Kippur, Shemini Atzeret, Passover and Shavuot. A memorial candle is lit just before the holiday begins.

Unveiling This is a ceremony of formally consecrating a tombstone which takes place towards the end of the first year after death.

9. Autopsy

Dissection for general scientific purposes is seen as a violation of the respect due the dead. Autopsies are generally opposed by Jewish law because:

- * Judaism asserts that man is created in the image of G-d. Thus, desecration of man's physical form would necessarily include desecration of G-d's image as well.
- * Judaism includes the belief in the resurrection of the physical body.
- * Some autopsies are not performed in a manner reflecting dignity to the deceased.
- * There is a history of cadavers being taken by medical students against the wishes of the family.

Autopsies are permitted in specific cases after receiving rabbinic consultation as to the nature, purpose and manner such a procedure would entail. If an autopsy is to be performed, it should involve only those organs that must be examined. In addition, all organs must be buried with the body.

- * A Rabbi is to be consulted regarding how an autopsy is to be handled before anything is actually done with the deceased.

10. Inquiries About Corpses in the Building

If someone calls to inquire if there is a Jewish corpse in the building this is because Kohanim (the priestly tribe within Judaism) are rendered spiritually unfit on coming into contact with the dead. Even being under the same roof is deemed by Jewish law as establishing a form of this forbidden contact. However, if the corpse is that of their own close relative, Kohanim are permitted to spiritually defile themselves in caring for the needs of the deceased.

11. The Last Confession (Abbreviated)

The following prayer is to be recited by the Jewish individual before death or just afterwards if it was not possible to do earlier. If that person is unable to say this prayer it may be recited by someone else on their behalf. Preference should be given to a family member, friend, a Jew who did not know the patient, or even a non-Jew.

“May my death serve as an atonement for all of my sins.

I confess to You, L-rd, my G-d and G-d of my fathers, that my healing and my passing are in Your hands. May it be Your will to grant me a complete cure. Yet if You have decreed in Your Heavenly Court that I should pass away, may my death serve as an atonement for all sins that I have committed before You. May You grant me a position in Paradise and enable me to merit life in the world to come which is set aside for the righteous.

**Hear O Israel, the L-rd is our G-d, the L-rd is One.
(Shema Yisrael, Adonai Elohainu, Adonai Echad)”**

For additional information please contact:

**Rabbi Ronald Weiss
Director of Chaplaincy Services
Jewish Family & Child Service
4600 Bathurst Street, 6th Floor
Toronto, Ontario M2R 3V3
Tel (416) 638-7800 x 217
Fax (416) 638-7943
email: rweiss@jfandcs.com**