

WHAT TO DO FIRST WHEN A DEATH OCCURS

- **Call your closest family members**

- **Contact the funeral home**

The funeral home will assist in all arrangements including transporting the body, locating a cemetery plot or arranging for cremation, and helping with a death notice and obituary.

The funeral director will request:

- Information about the deceased, including both English and Hebrew names
- Social Security Number
- Date and place of birth and death
- Names and relationships of close relatives

Jewish funeral homes serving the Chicago area are:

[Chicago Jewish Funerals](#)

Phone: (847) 229-8822

[Goldman Funeral Group](#)

Phone: (847) 478-1600

[Shalom Memorial Funeral Home](#)

Phone: (847) 306-4928

[Weinstein and Piser Funeral Home](#)

Phone: (847) 256-5700

- **Call Chicago Sinai at (312) 867-7000.**

During office hours, tell the person answering the phone that there has been a death in your family. That person will assist you and connect you with one of the rabbis. After office hours, call the same number and listen to instructions for contacting the emergency contact, who will connect you with one of the rabbis.

- **Designate a family member or friend who can make calls to other family and friends whom you want notified.**

INTRODUCTION

This mourner's guide is a resource for Chicago Sinai Congregation. We created it to help you understand Jewish funerals and mourning practices, whether you are pre-planning or have an immediate need.

We hope this guide can help during by offering practical guidance on the choices to be made and the practices that may be followed when someone dies.

There are traditional practices explained in this guide. Some of them may be meaningful to you while others may not. They are included to allow you to make your own informed choices. At Chicago Sinai, we recognize that there are many ways to practice Judaism, and we encourage you to work with one of our rabbis to honor your loved one's memory in a way that feels authentic for you and your family.

JEWISH TEACHING ON DEATH AND MOURNING RITUALS

Mourning rituals are an expression of Jewish values. Key teachings include:

Judaism teaches that death is part of every life

Therefore we have no choice but to confront it. This realistic view of death pervades the entire Jewish tradition from reciting the *Mourner's Kaddish* at the end of every prayer service, to the funeral service, to observing *yahrzeit*, the yearly anniversary of a loved one's death.

Judaism teaches simplicity in death as in life

The simplicity of Jewish burial is designed to avert the psychological pitfall of trying to honor the ones we loved by excessive spending. The religious prescription of a simple wooden coffin is meant to avoid ostentation at the funeral and to remind us that death is the great equalizer. The rationale is that we come into the world as equals and we should leave the world in the same way.

Judaism teaches the value of community

One of the strengths of Jewish life is the embrace of community at difficult times in our lives. In the face of the death of a loved one, community can help bring a sense of balance as we take our first shaky steps along the path from facing death back towards life. It is customary for the Jewish community to reach out to mourners in their time of grief and let them know they're not alone. Judaism transforms bereavement into a vehicle with the potential to strengthen familial ties, revitalize communal solidarity, and promote the sanctity of life itself..

PREPARING FOR THE FUNERAL

In the days before the funeral, your family, funeral director, or rabbi may ask you to make choices about traditional Jewish practices. Some of the practices explained in this section may be unfamiliar to you. Some, denoted with an asterisk, are not as common in the Reform tradition. We have included them for completeness and to provide context for those who may wish to observe more traditional rituals, but stress that at these times you should be guided in making decisions by what is comfortable and authentic for you.

Preparing the Body*

In all acts of preparing a body for its final rest, Jewish practice is guided by the principle of *kavod ha-met* (honor for the dead). The body can be prepared by a simple ritual washing, (*taharah*), dressing the body in simple cotton or linen clothing (*tachrichim*) and then placing the body in a plain pine casket. The *mitzvah* of *taharah* is performed by a *Chevra Kadisha* (Sacred Burial Society). Members of this volunteer group, largely anonymous, have been trained to do this very special work in our community. Chicago has two such groups: [Jewish Sacred Society of Chicago](#) and [Progressive Chevra Kadisha](#).

Dress of Deceased

In keeping with the tradition of dignity and simplicity, there is a Jewish tradition of dressing the deceased in *tachrichim*, burial shrouds. This tradition holds that everyone, regardless of socio-economic status, is equal at death. The *tachrichim* have no pockets, symbolizing that no matter how much or how little we may have acquired in the world, all of it stays in this world. While this custom remains an option, many choose to have their loved ones dressed in a suit or a dress.

The Casket

In Jewish practice, like many other rituals around death suggests simplicity, the casket is traditionally a simple wooden casket. This practice is guided by the biblical statement that “you are dust and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19) and the idea that the body be allowed to become a part of the earth as soon as possible.

Watching over the Body*

The funeral home may ask if you would like *shomrim* (guardians) to stay with the deceased. The *shomer* sits near the body twenty-four hours a day, including *Shabbat*, from the time the deceased enters the funeral home until the start of the funeral service. The *shomer* reads aloud Psalms or other holy texts.

Viewing of the Body

It is not Jewish practice to leave the casket open during the funeral. It is entirely appropriate, however, for family members to have an opportunity to spend some quiet, private moments saying their good-byes in advance of the public funeral service..

Organ Donation

The donation of body tissues or organs to save a life or to improve the health of others fulfills the Jewish principle of *pikuach nefesh* (saving a life). The deceased's will should be consulted for guidance.

Cremation

Reform Judaism allows for cremation. Traditionally, Judaism prohibited it because it does not allow for the body to naturally return to the earth, reuniting one part of creation with the rest of it. By contrast, burning the body has been seen as a desecration of something created in God's image and even a form of violence. Others find cremation to be a reminder of the fate of the millions of Jews who died in the Holocaust who were denied their humanity in death. Cremation is a deeply personal choice. Please know Sinai's rabbis will work your family and plan for the funeral regardless of your choice.

Flowers, Stones, and Donations

There is no prohibition against flowers but it has become Jewish practice to encourage well-wishers to give *tzedakah* (charitable gifts) as a more lasting memorial. It is a venerable Jewish custom when visiting a grave to leave a stone, rather than flowers, as both a simpler and more lasting symbol.

THE FUNERAL SERVICE

The funeral service may be held at Chicago Sinai, the chapel of the funeral home, at the grave site, or another location in the community. Some families choose to have a small private funeral for the family members and close friends, others choose to have a larger more public funeral service.

Traditionally, the funeral service is followed by a short service at the graveside and the interment of the casket. And, sometimes, there is only one service at the graveside.

However, other families choose to bury the casket before the funeral service. Still others, have a small private burial and at a later date a more public memorial service. Whatever choice that is made should be made for the comfort and needs of the family in mourning.

Before the funeral

Traditionally, Jewish funerals are simple and relatively short. Just before the start of the funeral service, the immediate family members will gather with the rabbi to observe the custom of *k'riyah*, tearing a small black ribbon that the immediate relatives pin on their clothing. While some in traditional circles will restrict the wearing of the ribbon to certain family members, Sinai's rabbis encourage all close family members who find this tradition meaningful to participate. This is an outward expression of the internal tearing of our hearts that comes with the death of a loved one.

The service

The Funeral service consists of the recitation of psalms, a eulogy, and the memorial prayer, *El Malei Rachamim*. The recitation of the Mourner's *Kaddish* takes place later at graveside.

Interment at the Cemetery

When the funeral procession arrives at the cemetery it is customary for everyone to walk behind those carrying the casket to the graveside.

The grave-side service is short: a few brief prayers or psalms, and passages expressing our belief that the bonds we have with each other transcend death. Other readings remind us that we can find comfort for our loss in the rich legacy of memories that remain. The *Mourner's Kaddish* is recited at graveside.

Near the conclusion of the service, newly dug earth is placed into the grave. Mourners who wish may follow in this tradition as an expression of farewell and honor. This painful *mitzvah*, of physically participating in the burial of a loved one, can also be healing.

Out of Town Funerals

If you have experienced the loss of an out-of-town family member or friend, please let us know. If the funeral will be out of town, we can connect you with local clergy and help you make decisions leading up to a funeral. When you are back in Chicago, if you would like to have a memorial or observe *shiva* with the support of your Chicago Sinai community, we would welcome the chance to facilitate.

MOURNING OBSERVANCES

Sitting *Shiva*

Shiva (Hebrew for seven) denotes the days of mourning immediately following burial.

The traditional period of mourning lasts a week but is not observed during *Shabbat* and holidays. Many Reform Jews choose to observe *shiva* for fewer days, but the length of *shiva* should be determined by the family of the deceased. This period is designed to provide mourners with the necessary time to ease the intensity of the pain and grief associated with deep loss, and to accept the comfort provided by their family and friends.

It is a time when family and friends gather to comfort and assist the mourners in any way possible. It is considered a great mitzvah to bring food and comfort to the mourners. During *shiva*, services are often held at the house of mourning so that the mourners may recite *Kaddish*. A Chicago Sinai rabbi can assist in conducting these services and will provide the prayer books if needed. Depending on the family's preference, the rabbis can lead a full evening service, or more simply offer an opportunity for reflection and the recitation of our Mourner's Kaddish prayer.

A seven-day memorial candle (known as a *shiva* candle) is usually burning at the home during *shiva*. This candle, which is provided by the funeral home, is lit upon returning from the cemetery. There is no blessing to be recited when lighting the *shiva* candle.

Relatives for whom one observes the rites of mourning include a parent, a child, a spouse, and siblings. There are a number of customs traditionally associated with *shiva* such as washing one's hands before entering the home, eating hard-boiled eggs as part of the first meal (symbolizing the cycle of life), covering mirrors and refraining from shaving and wearing makeup (symbols of vanity), and sitting on low stools (symbolizing humility and pain of the mourner).

Observing these customs is at the discretion of the individual mourner; some may take comfort in observing the more formal Jewish mourning traditions, others may not. Above all, *shiva* is a time for remembering: telling stories about the deceased, sharing anecdotes, and looking at photo albums. These may be some of the most helpful parts of the *shiva* experience.

Jewish tradition understands that once *shiva* has ended our lives do not automatically go back to normal. Therefore, Judaism prescribes a series of customs designed to lead the mourners back to the world by gradual steps.

The Period of *Sheloshim*

Sheloshim is the thirty-day intermediate period of time following burial. After *shiva*, the mourners can return to work and regular routine, but tradition suggests they should slowly begin participation in social activities. Some opt to continue to wear the torn ribbon for this period, although this is a matter of personal preference.

During this period the names of the recently departed will be read prior to the recitation of Kaddish at *Shabbat* evening services. It is a *mitzvah* to recite the *Kaddish* for loved ones during this time. For the loss of a parent, we extend the recitation of *Kaddish* to 11 months.

Yizkor

It is also traditional to recite *Yizkor* (remembrance prayer) four times a year at the temple: during the memorial service held on *Yom Kippur*, and during the festivals of *Simchat Torah*, the last day of *Pesach*, and *Shavuot*. Many people light a memorial candle at home on the eve of *Yizkor* as well. At Sinai, we observe *Yizkor* as a community on *Yom Kippur* afternoon.

Unveiling

The unveiling marks the placement of a monument or marker at the gravesite. Although many people wait 11 or 12 months for the unveiling of a tombstone or grave marker, it may take place any time after the *sheloshim* (30 days).

This simple ceremony can be conducted by a member of the clergy, by someone selected by the mourners, or by family members. Like the funeral service, it consists of psalms and readings, brief words about the deceased, the removal of the cloth covering the monument or marker (“unveiling”), the memorial prayer *El Malei Rachamim*, and the recitation of the Mourner’s *Kaddish*. For those families wishing to conduct this service on their own, a guide may be obtained from the Temple office.

Yahrzeit

Each year, *yahrzeit* (Yiddish for “a year’s time”) is observed on the anniversary of the death. Observance of this time is both public and private. Our custom at Chicago Sinai is to notify the family as the *yahrzeit* date approaches so that family members can be present at services to share the name of the loved one at the Friday evening *Shabbat* service and recite the Mourner’s *Kaddish*.

At home, a twenty-four-hour *yahrzeit* memorial candle (provided by Sinai Cares) is lit. This small flickering light, a universal symbol of the soul is both reflective and consoling. It gives form to memory: visible warm, incandescent light. Since Jewish days begin at sunset, the candle is lit on the evening before the day of the anniversary of the death. There is no specific blessing for lighting a *yahrzeit* candle.

Many people choose to [donate to a Temple fund](#) in memory of the deceased at this time each year. There are also other forms of memorial tributes at Chicago Sinai such as dedicating a prayer book or memorial plaque in honor of a loved one.

COPING WITH GRIEF AND LOSS

The days and months after a loss can be disorienting, tiring, and difficult. Our rabbis and the Sinai community are here to support you. Please do not hesitate to call the Sinai office to schedule time with a rabbi if you would like to talk.

We have also built relationships with several community organizations that offer extensive support services for family caregivers, the pre-bereaved, and mourners.

[JCFS Chicago Illness, Loss, and Spiritual Support Services](#)

JCFS Chicago offers workshops, loss-specific support groups and community presentations related to illness and loss. For more information, visit the [JCFS website](#) or call 855.275.5237

[Replogle Center for Counseling and Well-Being](#)

The Replogle Center provides programs that promote the healing of body, mind, and spirit, including a Grief Support group. The Grief Support Group meets on Monday evenings for four to six consecutive weekly sessions and is offered—free of charge—approximately five times a year (*based on interest, as a minimum of six people is needed to start a group*). For more information or to express interest in adding your name to the list for the group, visit the [Replogle Center website](#) or call 312.787.8425.

Thank you to Karen Purze and Betty Signer for putting together this document.