

# Temple Beth Sholom Salem, OR



## Guide to Communal Funeral and Mourning Practices

Av, 5769 / July, 2009

*“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of darkness, I will fear not evil because you are with me...” - Psalm 23*

## Introduction

One characteristic that makes us human is an awareness of our own mortality. Death touches every one of us in a number of different ways: we all will die and we all, at one time or another, will be mourners. Living in the context of a Jewish community, we all will have opportunities to receive and offer help at times of loss. When we are touched by death, we are reminded to value the gift of life. Awareness of death can enrich our daily lives by binding us closer to each other and to the continuum of our ancient past and unknown future.

Judaism provides sensitive and gentle guidance for navigating the process of mourning. Its ancient rituals and customs have relevance to our lives today, enriching and expanding our experiences and our sense of connectedness. Our tradition is wise in its understanding of human emotional needs. When a death occurs, the Jewish customs of mourning are a special gift to us. They give the bereaved a process to follow that provides an embracing structure during a time of turmoil. They guide the comforters toward sensitivity and action, reminding us of our profound connection to each other. Through contact with the Jewish community, many mourners feel a deepened appreciation of Judaism. This may lead to an increased sense of wholeness in their lives.

This booklet attempts to explain Jewish customs dealing with death and mourning, and some of the underlying values expressed through them. We hope it answers questions for some, raises questions for others, and generates thought and discussion among family and friends. If you read this booklet thinking only about the death, burial, and mourning of others, you may be missing an important opportunity. We invite you to use it to explore your feelings about your own mortality and your wishes concerning the rituals following your own death. Reading this booklet may bring up concerns and questions for you. Feel free to contact Rabbi James or the chairs of the *Hevrah Kadishah* for further discussion or if you are interested in becoming part of the *Hevrah*.

Some important information may have been inadvertently omitted here, and for this the writers ask forgiveness. Although not comprehensive, this booklet is a starting point for educating yourself about Jewish burial and mourning rituals, and what Temple Beth Shalom has to offer the Jewish community.

May you be blessed so that your life is filled with *simhah* (joy) and may the inevitable times of grief serve to heighten your *simhas* in their seasons.

Shalom,

Temple Beth Shalom Religious Practices Committee

### Advance Preparation

The immediate burden of dealing with the death of a loved one can be eased greatly if basic decisions are made in advance and communicated to those who will need to carry them out. This guide is designed to discuss some of the important decisions that need to be made in connection to a death. It is helpful to make decisions about these subjects, and extremely important to communicate this information to family members before it seems necessary.

### Who is a Mourner

A mourner is someone who has lost someone close to them. The formal structure of Jewish mourning is called upon for immediate family. Primary mourners are those who have lost a parent, a spouse, significant other, a sibling, or a child. However, we recognize that some may wish to mourn for other relatives, friends and community members in our life's journey. You may wish to follow some of these traditional customs for these other losses as well.

### What To Do When Someone Dies

Losing someone we care for is perhaps the most difficult thing many of us experience in life. However, our tradition has some teachings and lessons that can ease that process. At a time of loss, the initial focus of the survivors is on the deceased. The first thing to do is to contact Rabbi James at the Temple Beth Shalom office or, after hours, on his cell phone as indicated on the TBS phone message. One of the co-chairs of the Hevrah Kadishah<sup>1</sup> will then contact you and help you make funeral arrangements and other important decisions. If arrangements have not been made previously, Rabbi James will help contact Golden's, the local funeral home that we work with. A time for the funeral will be set after checking with Rabbi James. In the event that Rabbi James is not available, there is a backup rabbi on call.

### Aninut

*Aninut*, the period between the moment of death and the funeral, is often the most intense period of shock and grief. During this time the primary task for the survivors is preparing the funeral. The mourners are, in effect, "pulled out" of ordinary life by the experience of death. At this moment of disruption, Jewish law wisely has the survivor excused from all other responsibilities to allow focused attention on planning the funeral, in conversation with family members and Rabbi James.

In some families there may be complex dynamics or even estrangement. All mourners have the right to be notified of the death and to participate appropriately. A death in the family can provide an opportunity to rise above the conflict and, where possible, to make peace.

For friends of the survivor, the period until the funeral is a particularly delicate time. Friends can help in many ways: driving or accompanying your friend as s/he make funeral arrangements, taking care of children or picking up incoming family at the airport. This is a good time to begin arranging for food to be brought to the home, from now through the end of

---

<sup>1</sup> The Hevrah Kadishah is a committee of Jewish men and women who see to it that the bodies of Jews are prepared for burial according to Jewish tradition and are watched over until burial. Two of the main requirements are the showing of proper respect for a corpse and the ritual cleansing of the body and subsequent dressing for burial. It is usually referred to as a burial society in English. Throughout Jewish tradition, membership in the Hevrah Kadishah has been reserved for the most well respected members of the Jewish community.

*shivah* (see below for further details). Above all, you can offer your support. A silent hug or a helping gesture is worth far more than words at this time of peak stress. Do not feel that you are obligated to come up with the one magical phrase that will make everything "all right." Your presence and your concern are of great value.

### Death out of town

In the event that you have lost a close friend or relative, and the funeral will be out of town, we ask that you please contact the synagogue to let us know. There are many things that Temple Beth Sholom can do to be of assistance, including arranging for a meal of consolation to be brought to your home after you return, hosting a *shivah minyan* in town if you would like, and many other things. Rabbi James is available to be with you, and our community is committed to helping its members to mourn amongst community.

### Organ Donation

One uniquely important decision relating to death is whether to offer to be an organ donor. As the bumper sticker slogan reads, "Donate Your Organs -- Heaven Knows We Need Them Here On Earth!" Organ donation is among the truest ways in which we can live on after our own passing. Reconstructionists encourage organ donation as an ultimate example of saving a life – *piku'ah nefesh*. Temple Beth Sholom has been uniquely affected by its members who have suffered through organ failure. We thank you for being an organ donor. If you are not yet registered, we ask you to consider doing so.

### Autopsy and Embalming

Jewish tradition holds that the body should be returned to God as it is given. This mandates that except where medically necessary, the body should remain intact from death through burial. The practice of routine autopsies is contrary to Jewish law, since autopsies are viewed as a desecration of the body. In cases where the law requires an autopsy we follow the Jewish principle of *dina demalhuta dina*, the law of the land is the law. However, it should be made known that all tissue and fluids should be given to the funeral home for burial with the body upon completion of the autopsy. Some autopsies will negate the possibility for a *taharah*.

In all cases except where legally required, Jewish tradition does not allow for embalming or the use of any cosmetics prior to burial.

### Funeral Home

Golden's Funeral Service is the funeral home that the *Hevrah Kadishah* is most accustomed to working with. They provide a space for the *Hevrah* to perform the *taharah* ritual (see below for further details), for *shomrim* to watch over the deceased and Golden's is generally nice to work with. They also have experience in conducting Jewish funerals. Although you can choose any funeral home, we recommend Golden's to you, given their long relationship with Temple Beth Sholom and the *Hevrah Kadishah*.

A funeral home picks up the body from the place of death, provides a place where the body is prepared, and transports the body to the synagogue and/or cemetery. The *Hevrah Kadishah* provides caskets, which can be purchased through the funeral home. When making

funeral decisions, you may want to draw on the expertise of the *Hevrah Kadishah* or Rabbi James.

### Cremation

In Jewish tradition, burial is considered a sacred obligation. Judaism has always held a strong objection to cremation as a valid form of disposal of human remains. Nevertheless, there is no specific prohibition in the Bible or the Talmud to cremation. At Temple Beth Shalom, we strongly discourage cremation because it is contrary to Jewish custom. However, if members choose cremation, Rabbi James will perform a memorial service for the deceased and internment of cremains is possible in certain sections of Waverly cemetery. Please be in touch with Rabbi James or a member of the *Hevrah Kadishah* when making final plans or arranging for cremation.

### Shemirah

The *mitzvot* of *kevod hamet* (honoring the dead) are considered of upmost importance in Jewish tradition. This is because no one can ever say thank you for accompanying them along their journey toward the final resting place. Because of this, those who serve as members of the *Hevrah Kadishah* are not named or thanked for their important work, which begins with keeping watch over the body, also known as *shemirah*.

We show regard for the deceased by respectful treatment of the body. This begins at the moment of death. Jewish tradition holds that the body should not be left alone until the burial. This expresses the idea that a Jewish funeral is a *levayah*, an accompanying, of the body to the grave. Traditionally, the *Hevrah Kadishah* observes this custom by having a *shomer/et*, or guardian, stay with the deceased at all times. We will work with the family to locate volunteers to help with *shemirah* when requested. Usually the *shomer* sits with the body while reading from the Book of Job, Psalms or contemporary writings on spirituality or the subject of death. If you would like to serve as a *shomer/et*, please be in touch with the co-chairs of the *Hevrah Kadishah* or with Rabbi James.

### Taharah

The *taharah*, performed by members of a *Hevrah Kadishah*, is a gentle and respectful ritual honoring the body as the miraculous vessel that at one time housed the soul in life. Great care is taken to preserve the dignity and modesty of the *met* (body of the deceased). In addition to washing the body, the *taharah* involves reciting prayers while pouring water in a continuous flow. This is reminiscent of the living waters of the *mikvah* (ritual bath) used by traditional Jews to honor occasions of transition.

Traditionally, the *Hevrah Kadishah* dresses the dead in simple white burial garments, called *tahrimim*. This is in keeping with the Jewish belief that a funeral should be simple, without display of wealth. Simple services reinforce the Jewish concept that we are all equal before God. The material of the plain linen *tahrimim* remind us of the garment worn by the High Priest when he entered the Holy of Holies in the Temple on *Yom Kippur*. Additionally some people are buried with their own *tallit* (which is altered by the removal of one fringe) and *kippah*.

Dirt from Israel is symbolically placed on the body and over the eyes. Traditionally we are buried without any metal or jewelry.

## The Coffin

Jewish burial traditionally takes place in an unlined wooden coffin, or *aron*. The coffin should have no metal hinges, nails, or fasteners; anything that will not decompose once placed in the grave. Simplicity is emphasized, allowing the natural effects of the world to permit the return from "dust to dust." Elaborate coffins are seen as undue expense and unnecessary ostentation. In modern Israel the dead are wrapped only in a shroud and lowered into the ground on a bed of reeds without a casket; in America a casket is almost always used. As with many aspects of Jewish burial practice, the simplicity of the coffin speaks to the inherent equality of all peoples and the stark reality of death.

## Waverly Cemetery

The Waverly Cemetery in Albany, OR is the cemetery used by the Jewish communities of Salem and Corvallis. The history of the cemetery is quite interesting. It was consecrated as a Jewish cemetery in the late 1800's and was in use until the early 1900's, at which point the Jewish community of Albany dissolved. The cemetery came under the care of the Masonic Lodge of Albany and remains in their care to this day. The Jewish communities of Salem and Corvallis eventually discovered the Jewish nature of the cemetery and re-consecrated the ground for use as a place for Jewish burial.

Plots at Waverly are available for purchase through Golden's. If you plan to be buried outside of Waverly Cemetery or if you are arranging a funeral for someone not being buried there, please contact Rabbi James or the chairs of the Hevrah Kadishah for more information.

## The Funeral

Before the service, mourners participate in the custom of *keriyah*, the Rending of Garments. In this ancient ritual, the mourner tears a black ribbon, symbolizing death rending the fabric of life. The mourners stand together signifying strength, and recite a prayer acknowledging the inevitability of death. With the exception of Shabbat, the ribbon may be worn for the next 30 days.

During the funeral service, the immediate family usually sits in the front row of the chapel, sanctuary or graveside. The traditional service includes the chanting of psalms, a retelling of the deceased's life called a *hesped*, and *el maley rahamim* (the traditional memorial prayer) asking for eternal peace for the deceased. Additional readings or musical offerings may also be appropriate. A family member, Rabbi James, or a friend of the deceased may give a *hesped*, alone or in combination. Mourners are not expected to give the eulogy, but may do so if they desire.

Rabbi James, who generally will give a eulogy, will spend time with the family, even if he was well acquainted with the deceased, talking about her/him. This process is valuable not only for the writing of an appropriate eulogy, but also for the mourners themselves. A grieving family, depressed and in shock, may experience some degree of healing through sharing memories of the deceased. This sharing is thus valuable both for the rabbi and for the family, and is often a warm and even enjoyable experience.

At the funeral, the closed coffin remains in view, often covered with a special cloth called a *pall*. At the end of the service the coffin is borne from the funeral home to the hearse,

and upon its arrival at the cemetery is taken from the hearse to the gravesite by family or friends (pallbearers) selected by the mourners. Four to six pallbearers are common; women and men, Jews and gentiles all may serve in this capacity, though immediate mourners generally do not. Honorary pallbearers also may be selected. Staff of the funeral home and members of the *Hevrah Kadishah* will assist with moving the coffin, if requested.

### Children at the Service

People often wonder if children should be present at a funeral. There is no reason, according to our tradition, for a child to be excluded. Whether a child attends is a family decision based on the child's maturity and wishes. It is important to realize that children also have feelings of loss, as well as all the other emotions of grief. Furthermore, their inexperience may lead them to misinterpret the tensions and grief present in the house and to conclude that they are somehow at fault. It is important that an adult take time to explain what has happened, to listen to children's feelings, and to dispel any mistaken conclusions they may have drawn. Rabbi James will be willing to help you talk with the children before the service as well as to share available resources about mourning that are designed for young people.

### The Year of Mourning

On returning from the cemetery, it is traditional for the mourners to place a pitcher of water, a bowl and towels outside the door of the house for the ritual hand washing by family and friends entering to comfort them. This custom is an affirmation of life after the close contact with death. Also, a special *shivah* candle is lit, which burns for the next seven days. Usually relatives and friends will serve a meal of consolation to all who return from the cemetery with the mourners. If further help is needed in coordinating this or other elements of the mourning process, let Rabbi James or the *Hevrah Kadishah* know.

*Shiva*: The seven-day period of intense mourning observed by the immediate family of the deceased, beginning on the day of burial, is called *shivah*. During the time of *shivah*, mourners are encouraged to remain home and refrain from routine activities, so that friends and relatives can visit and offer support. Mourners can use this time to adjust to the death, and to think about what life now will be like. Many families do not observe *shivah* for the full week, or observe it to varying degrees. Depending on the mourners' preferences, *kaddish* may be said daily in the home in the presence of a *minyan*. This provides an opportunity for members of the congregation to join the mourners in prayers, reminiscences, and in offering emotional support. Temple Beth Sholom will arrange evening *shivah minyanim* for the mourners for as many days as they would like.

There are numerous traditional customs associated with mourning, such as covering the mirrors in a house of mourning, having mourners sit on lower seats, not shaving or grooming oneself, and giving *tzedakah* (charity/righteousness) in honor of the deceased instead of flowers. In Reconstructionist practice, mourners make their own decisions about these and other customs. While light food usually is provided for visitors during the *shivah*, families involved in mourning should not be concerned about hosting. The members of Temple Beth Sholom are aware of the custom to bring food with them when they make a *shivah* call, and there is always more than enough food to go around. Temple Beth Sholom will help with these

arrangements also, and will publicize any particular *kashrut*, dietary, or other requirements (usually dairy/vegetarian food). *Shiva* is suspended for *Shabbat*, when mourners are encouraged to go to the synagogue to say *kaddish*.

Because the death is considered a loss for the entire community, the deceased's name will be read by Rabbi James or the service leader shortly before the mourner's *kaddish* on *Shabbat* morning. Major festivals traditionally interrupt *shivah*, often ending it early. Please consult with Rabbi James on this situation, as necessary.

At the end of the *shivah* it is customary for a friend or relative to walk those who are in mourning around the block to signify the end of this period. If the death and burial occur out of town, congregants often hold *shivah minyanim* when they return home to receive the emotional support provided by the synagogue. Please contact Rabbi James to arrange these *minyanim*.

*Sheloshim*: The thirty days after the burial are called the *sheloshim* period, when mourners return to work and normal activities, but refrain from public entertainment or socializing. The *keriyah* ribbon is worn during this time. During this time, the name of the deceased will continue to be read in the synagogue each *Shabbat*, allowing for continued opportunities for the mourners to feel the support of the congregation.

*Shenat ha'evel* (year of mourning): Traditionally, mourners who have lost a parent say *kaddish* daily for 11 months, whereas mourning for all other relatives ends with the *sheloshim*. In modern practice, mourners may recite *kaddish* for 11 months for other immediate relatives as well. Of course, *kaddish* is just one way of remembering the deceased during this year after the death.

*Yahrzeit*: The anniversary of the death, rather than of the burial, is commemorated by saying *kaddish* in the synagogue and by lighting a *yahrzeit* candle at home. *Yahrzeit* candles burn for 24 hours and can be purchased at the Temple Beth Sholom Gift Shop. On the *Shabbat* after the *yahrzeit*, Rabbi James or the service leader will read the name of the deceased from the *bimah*.

### Attending to the Mourners

For the visitors, there is something of an art to paying a condolence call. What is most valuable to the mourner and most important to our community is your presence. Focus on the mourner and be guided by his/her mood, inclination to talk or be silent, to weep or laugh. It is traditional to not approach or speak to a mourner upon entering a house of mourning until they speak to you. In general, let your own sense of the situation serve as your guide. In many communities superficial and light conversation is common practice, and even assumed to be the purpose of a *shivah* call. However, it is not the role of the visitor to seek to distract the mourners from their grief process but rather to support them in it. Nor is it the role of the visitor to force the mourner to mourn if they are not so inclined. As well as sitting in sympathetic silence, one can ask open-ended questions such as "how are you doing?" Your own memories, stories, and reflections about the deceased may provide a complement to those of

the mourners. Obviously, if what you have to say is neither discreet nor becoming, this may not be the time to share it.

Sometimes one may find one's own feelings opened up in the process of paying a *shivah* call. Grief is part of the human condition, and sharing it highlights our equality in the face of death and loss. At the same time, it is important to remember that the mourner's needs are your primary focus. The support we give each other at such times benefits everyone, mourner and comforter alike.

As a mourner it is important to remember that although people are coming to visit you, you are not their host. You do not need to offer refreshments; visitors are to supply them. You do not need to engage in conversation if you prefer to be silent or alone. In short you are excused from the conventional demands of politeness and hospitality. Feel free to shape the content of the *shivah* to best support your own needs. That may include asking for the company of specific people, asking for specific prayers or readings, or specific foods.

### Markers

The gravestone or monument (*matzevah*) can be selected shortly after the funeral, though we usually wait until after the eleventh month of mourning to hold the unveiling. The text on the stone often includes the full Hebrew name of the deceased, as well as the English name. The Hebrew and English dates of birth and death may be included as well as a short Hebrew phrase. Rabbi James can help with this process, and monuments may be ordered through Golden's.

### Unveiling

The basic mitzvah of the unveiling is visiting the grave. The unveiling is simply the first opportunity to do so after the placement of the monument.

Customs differ, but the unveiling is held after *sheloshim* and usually in the month before the first *yahrzeit*. The unveiling service is a relatively recent practice originating in the United States. Technically, a rabbi need not be present, but it is helpful to have an experienced person officiate. Rabbi James is happy to help families plan an unveiling or to officiate for families who request it. Please be in touch with him for resources or to discuss arrangements. The ceremony is very brief, usually consisting of a few psalms and readings, brief words about the deceased, the removal of a covering from the monument, the *el maley rahamim*, and the mourner's *kaddish*.

The unveiling reminds us that we will continue to visit the grave on *yahrzeit* and during the High Holy Day season, and that the memory of the person will always be with us as our life continues.

### Tzedakah

There is a close connection between *tzedakah* (giving to charity) and the various mourning customs. It is customary to make charitable contributions in memory of the deceased. Rabbi James will ask in your initial conversation about any organizations or causes important to the deceased, or you may select another organization. It is customary at a *yahrzeit* to honor the memory of the deceased by giving *tzedakah*.

### Addendum

This booklet was reviewed and edited during the Summer of 2009 by the Religious Practices Committee and *Hevrah Kadishah* of Temple Beth Shalom. Participating at different points in the process were Rabbi James Greene, Craig Cowan, Cheryl Owens, Kevin Opgenorth, Todd Silverstein, Larry Konick, Chris Boga, Joan Myles and Judith Havas.

The *Hevrah Kadishah* welcomes volunteers to help provide assistance to families, to help with *taharah* and *shemirah* and many other tasks. Please call the office if you would like to be of assistance.

The contents of this booklet were adapted from the Mourning Manuals written by The Columbia Jewish Congregation and Adat Shalom in Maryland. We are grateful to those congregations, for the work on which this document stands. It was then rewritten and modified to reflect the local customs and community style of Temple Beth Shalom.