

Guide to Jewish Mourning and Condolence

Immediate Steps

For those who have just suffered a loss, here's a quick outline of immediate steps to take, with links to relevant portions of the full Guide to Jewish Mourning and Condolence:

1. Call a [Jewish Funeral Director](#) to arrange for pick-up of the body and to learn the available times for the funeral at a [Jewish Cemetery](#) (cemetery property must be purchased if not already arranged for pre-need).
2. [Call the VBS office](#) (818-788-6000) to inform the Rabbis and Pararabbinic counselors, and to learn the availability of the Rabbis to conduct the funeral.
3. Based upon these initial calls, [arrange for a time for the funeral](#).
4. Have your Havurah, friends, or family [make calls to family and friends with the funeral information](#).
5. If not already arranged for pre-need, purchase the [coffin](#).
6. Have your Havurah, close friends, or family [arrange for the Shivah meals](#).

The full [Guide to Jewish Mourning and Condolence](#) begins on the next page.

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A Guide to Jewish Mourning and Condolence

by Jerry Rabow

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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| <i>Immediate Steps</i> | i |
| Table of Contents | ii |
| Preface | 1 |
| Rabbinical Foreword to Original Edition | 2 |
| Part 1 - Introduction | 5 |
| A. Goals Of This Booklet..... | 5 |
| B. Our Attitudes About Death..... | 5 |
| Part 2 – Lifetime Considerations | 8 |
| A. Terminal Illness..... | 8 |
| B. Advance Funeral and Burial Arrangements | 9 |
| Part 3-Mourning and Condolence..... | 11 |
| A. Who Are the "Mourners" Under Jewish Law? | 11 |
| B. The Immediate Decisions Required Upon a Death..... | 11 |
| C. The Roles of the Mourners and the Community Between the Death and the Funeral | 17 |

| | |
|---|-----------|
| D. The Basic Elements Of The Funeral Service..... | 17 |
| E. The First Meal After The Funeral | 20 |
| F. The Shivah..... | 21 |
| G. The Sheloshim Period | 23 |
| H. Mourning Observances For Deceased Parents..... | 24 |
| I. The Customs Of Later Remembrance..... | 24 |
| Part 4-The Psychology and Jewish Philosophy of Mourning .. | 26 |
| A. The Psychological Stages Of Mourning..... | 26 |
| B. The Jewish Response To The Questions Of Mourning | 28 |
| Part 5-Selected Readings..... | 31 |
| A. Poetry by Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis..... | 31 |
| B. Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis Q & A (Questions 1-7):..... | 32 |
| C. Reading by Rabbi Edward Feinstein: | 32 |
| D. Prayers | 32 |
| E. Sermons | 32 |
| F. Tapes..... | 32 |
| Part 6-Further Resources | 33 |
| A. Who To Call..... | 33 |
| B. Bereavement Support Group: | 34 |
| C. Books and Websites | 34 |
| D. Hospital, Cemetery, Funeral, and Advance Need Arrangements | 36 |
| E. If Financial Assistance is Needed | 38 |
| Part 7 – ADDITIONAL ARTICLES..... | 39 |
| A. How to Prepare a Eulogy, <i>by Rabbi Edward Feinstein</i> | 39 |

B. How to Do an Unveiling Ceremony, *by Rabbi Edward Feinstein* 41

C. The Art of Making a Shivah Call, *by Dr. Ron Wolfson* 43

Part 8 - GLOSSARY 47

Preface

The original printed version of this booklet was prepared in 1982 for the members of Valley Beth Shalom Synagogue, 15739 Ventura Boulevard, Encino, California, 91436. Project planning and manuscript editing assistance was provided by Ronald Blanc and Alan Shulman, *l"z* (members of the VBS Pararabbinic project) and Lola Rabow and Jeanie Blanc, *l"z* (members of the VBS Paraprofessional Counseling project). The manuscript was also reviewed for the VBS Counseling Center by Charlotte Samuels and Barbara Braun. Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis and Rabbi Frederic Margulies served as advisers for the entire project, participating in overall planning and reviewing drafts of the manuscript.

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This 2007 downloadable version was updated and prepared under the direction of Rabbi Edward Feinstein with the assistance of members of the VBS Website Committee, and the special cooperation of Phyllis Beim, Chair of the Committee, and members Cheryl Gilles, David Summer, and Steve Mark.

Many individuals graciously shared with us memories of their personal mourning experiences, and provided us with both specific information and general encouragement. This booklet is dedicated to them and to all the families with whom we share the pain, the dignity, and ultimately the mutually uplifting experience of Jewish mourning and condolence.

Jerry Rabow

Rabbinical Foreword to Original Edition

There are events that turn the simplest Jew into a theologian. There are private holocausts so powerful that they shake the very foundations of his being. Two searing words escape from within him: *Why me?* Those two words carry a world of presuppositions, expectations and feelings. They must be respected, unraveled and explored. Regrettably the hour of the funeral is not the appropriate moment for philosophy. The mourner is too numbed and confused for theological discussion. The rabbi counsel, "Do not seek to restrain him in the hour of his anger. Do not attempt to comfort him while his dead lies before him. Do not question him in the hour of his vow." More than theology, he needs an arm around his shoulders, the presence of comforters, the support of his community.

The time to understand the practice and theory of the ritual of mourning and the Jewish wisdom of consolation is when the mind and heart are more tranquil. These are the moments in which to prepare oneself for that which is inevitable, irrevocable and which ought not break our spirit.

We are indebted to Jerry Rabow for having skillfully assimilated the wisdom of our tradition, combined them with valuable data from secular and religious sources, and presented them with great sensitivity. Facing terminal sickness and death calls for courage, patience, understanding and faith. A spiritual gyroscope is needed to help us navigate the turbulent waters and orient us toward mature living. This booklet is a wise and benevolent guide.

Judaism is governed by two principles: the reality principle and the ideality principle. The world as it is must not be falsified. The world as it ought to be must not be ignored. Both principles inform the Jewish attitude towards death. A striking passage in the [Talmud](#) (Tractate *Avodah Zarah* 54b) observes that it would be just if stolen seeds would not sprout or if women violated would not become pregnant -- but "nature pursues its own course." That is the reality principle in Judaism. Stones are sharp and cliffs are steep and steel bullets pierce the body. The world is not magically moral. Accidents and disease are real, and reality is not of itself moral. God created the universe but the universe is not divine. God created the human being in the image of divinity but the human being is not God. Sickness and death are not the judgments of a punishing God nor are they the rewards of an inscrutable Deity. They are the ways of the world, the way that nature pursues its own course.

The ideality principle in Judaism knows the incompleteness of the world and the imperatives to repair its broken vessels, to protect the innocent and strengthen and sanctify society. God is in the lengthening of life, in the healing of the sick, in loosening the bond, in comforting the bereaved.

The rituals which surround the mourning process provide the mourner with a language of the heart enabling him to express his sorrow, anger and ultimately his reconciliation with death. They are the language of our people which we appropriate to speak our anguish and hope. We share it with all who mourn and are comforted in the knowledge

that we are not alone. May this guide help us find the strength of character within us to live with meaning and sanctify His name.

Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis

No studies at the Seminary, no course in death and dying, could have prepared me for what I came to see and live as a rabbi in contact with death. Nothing I could have read would have taught me how to hold the hand of a forty-year-old father dying of cancer. Nothing could have stopped my stomach from turning at the apparent injustice of it all. No studies can tell the rabbi how to keep his mind from coming apart in the face of the tragic death of a child. Ultimately, everyone is unprepared for death.

So how do we at least try to deal with death? How, according to our tradition, do we care for the dead? How do we bury the dead? How do we console the mourners? How can we be of help? Does Judaism have something to say about these issues concerning death? The answer, of course, is yes.

Jerry Rabow has ventured, with the assistance of two Paraprofessionals, his wife Lola and Jeanie Blanc, two Pararabbinics, Ron Blanc and Alan Shulman, and Rabbi Schulweis and myself, to show the Jewish attitude towards these matters and how each of us can be better prepared for our encounters with death: as a friend offering consolation, as a family member making funeral preparations, as a mourner. Many of the issues discussed in this booklet will help each of us face our own death, and therefore our life, with better clarity.

Our tradition teaches us that anything we do in helping with someone's burial is an act of "chesed," of loving-kindness. It is the one thing we do for someone else for which they cannot thank us. It becomes an expression of our own humanity and of our love for that person.

Freud has taught us, in essence, that the good life is one that is filled with meaning through the lasting, sustaining, mutually gratifying relationships we are able to establish with those we love, and through the satisfaction we derive from knowing that we are engaged in work that helps us and others to have a better life. A good life does not deny its real and often painful difficulties; rather, it is a life in which our hardships are not permitted to engulf us in despair. Judaism helps us through the process of death and separation so that we can continue with the process of life, enriched by our relationships with others: those whom we carry in memory and those with whom we are still creating memories.

Our hope is that you will read this booklet when you do not need it. Read it now; discuss it with your family, your Havurah, with the Pararabbinics, with the rabbis. Familiarize yourself with its contents so that Jewish tradition can become a part of you and your life. This booklet will help you to understand our tradition, to face the trials of death better

informed, better prepared and better able to cope. We are grateful to Jerry Rabow for the work and time he put into preparing this valuable resource for us.

Rabbi Frederic Margulies

Part 1 - Introduction

A. Goals Of This Booklet

1. Multi-disciplinary Approach:

This booklet will attempt to approach these complex issues on a multi-disciplinary basis. We try to provide basic answers to some legal questions which arise in death and mourning. Some of the important financial information about funeral arrangements is also discussed. We try to be sensitive to the psychological aspects of mourning and condolence, from the point of view of both the bereaved family and the friends and community. Most importantly, we attempt to describe authentic traditional Jewish standards, while also exploring some possible adaptations to contemporary circumstances.

This booklet will fulfill its most important goal if these discussions help lead to the development of contemporary standards for mourning and condolence which are appropriate and meaningful for family, friends, Havurot, and our synagogue community in general.

2. Necessary Advice:

It is important to understand that this booklet is neither intended as, nor constitutes, an official, authoritative statement of Conservative Judaism or of policies adopted or approved by Valley Beth Shalom or its Rabbis. VBS members are urged to consult with the appropriate authorities available to them through the synagogue as part of the proper use of this booklet. Religious questions can only receive authentic and authoritative responses with the help of the Rabbis, as assisted by the synagogue's Ritual Director and [Pararabbinics](#). Psychological issues can be extremely important, and the professional assistance of a psychiatrist, psychologist, family doctor or a VBS Paraprofessional Counselor can be an important step in the mourning and condolence process. Any financial information given here obviously could not be fully accurate or remain up-to-date, and the Jewish funeral director and the Valley Beth Shalom cemetery committee should be consulted for current prices. Legal issues and specific legal questions should be referred to an attorney. One way in which VBS serves its members in time of need is to provide referrals to an appropriate source of advice for any of these matters. [See the "Who To Call" list in the "Further Resources Section below for direct VBS telephone numbers.](#)

B. Our Attitudes About Death

Traditional Jewish attitudes about death are an integral part of overall Jewish attitudes and philosophy about life. Death has always been seen as a part of the natural process of life. Our reaction to the death-worshipping cultures of ancient Egypt has ingrained in Jews an avoidance of excessive focus upon death. For traditional Jews, the practices surrounding death, funeral and mourning are governed, as are all features of daily life,

by an intricate set of detailed rules, each of which has something significant to say about the underlying philosophy of life and relationship to God and fellow human beings.

1. Contemporary American Problems:

In contemporary America, many Jews have lost their connection with the tradition. Searching for the rich philosophical basis of their Jewish tradition, they are often unaware of the form or meaning of many of the ritual procedures. Moreover, Jews in America have been strongly influenced by the secular and Christian doctrines and attitudes of our mass culture, as often shown in the movies and on TV. Especially because so little is generally discussed in the home about traditional Jewish beliefs related to death, we and our children have grown to believe that certain secular or Christian practices are Jewish because they all seem “traditional.” Indeed, many Jews are shocked to learn that Judaism does not follow practices such as viewing the corpse at the funeral, flowers and floral wreaths, and the wake or celebration of the deceased. (Our reasons for not following these practices are discussed below.)

2. Development of Our Tradition:

Of course, we must keep in mind that defining the authentic Jewish tradition is not a simple task. Judaism has gone through thousands of years of challenge, response, and adaptation to threats and influences of the majority cultures in which it has existed. Judaism has responded to the exigencies of the times by developing various traditions that did not have their source in biblical Judaism. Many Conservative Jews believe that it is the obligation of contemporary Jews to continue the process of adapting our authentic Jewish traditions and reinvesting them with new meaning so that they fulfill their functional role of helping the mourners and the community respond to the death of one of our members.

3. Psychological Needs:

In one respect, we have an easier job in thinking about this matter than did the ancient rabbis in their attempts to interpret and develop Jewish mourning traditions. As a result of modern psychological and sociological research, we know a great deal about the psychological aspects of bereavement and mourning. We understand now that the bereaved generally have certain common needs in response to certain common pressures, and that the mourning, funeral, and condolence practices of the community cannot be considered appropriate if they ignore these psychological needs. Indeed, one of the most fascinating insights derived from a study of traditional Jewish mourning practices is just how remarkably fitting, in terms of modern-day psychological understanding, the traditional Jewish practices are. Rabbis of several thousand years ago were able, simply on the basis of their general observations of human nature, to develop practices whose timing and content closely track the most recent studies of sound psychological practice in this area.

4. Changing Our Attitudes:

It is hoped that this booklet will have a significant effect upon our attitudes about death. First of all, it is important that we and our children come to accept death as a part of life, and to see the transition from life to death as an inevitable part of the process of life. Secondly, the traditional Jewish mourning practices speak to us movingly and meaningfully about the Jewish philosophy of life. We should study and learn these lessons and integrate them into our own views of life. Finally, this booklet is about both mourning and condolence. This duality recognizes the fact that the death of a member of our community calls forth action, response, and obligation, not merely from the immediate family, but also from the friends, [Havurah](#), and community at large, all of whom have vitally important roles to play in the process of supporting the bereaved. It is hoped that this booklet will furnish all of us with sufficient knowledge to feel confident and comfortable in carrying out our condolence [mitzvot](#).

Part 2 – Lifetime Considerations

A. Terminal Illness

A discussion of Jewish condolence practices can appropriately begin with the closely related traditions concerning relationships with the sick.

1. Visiting the Sick:

In traditional Judaism, the visiting of the sick ([*bikur holim*](#)) has always been regarded as a very important community obligation. This obligation relates not only to visiting close friends or family members who are ill, but is a general community obligation regardless of the existence or degree of prior personal relationship.

Visitors should remember not to stand over the sick bed. That posture emphasizes the difference between the healthy, upright visitor and the sick, debilitated patient. The patient could also interpret the visitor's standing as a sign of impatience and eagerness to leave.

2. Problems of Terminal Illness:

When a patient is not only ill, but also terminally ill, the difficulties for everyone involved obviously become intensified. The patient himself is in a unique state. The family is greatly affected by the distress of the impending loss. Moreover, the visitor is burdened with the knowledge of the forthcoming loss, and the concern that comes from not knowing how to act or what to say.

We should note that, while no firm rules can be expressed, our general experience can provide guides for conduct in these situations. The seriously ill patient is generally more able to control the course of conversation than we commonly believe. Patients typically know the gravity of their illnesses, either because they have been told, or because they can surmise the facts from the actions and statements of those around them. However, patients differ in their readiness to discuss these matters openly. Most studies indicate that it is best to let the patient take the lead. The visitor should be ready to discuss or ignore the situation as the patient seems to call for. However, such respect for the patient's own right to deal with the situation on the patient's terms should not be twisted into a conspiracy of lying to the patient. The patient's last days have a special meaning and value that is incompatible with surrounding him with a facade of deception.

3. Conversations with the Terminally Ill:

One good way to initiate conversations with the patient is simply to ask, "How are you feeling today?" Or where your personal relationship with the patient is close, you could ask, "What does the doctor say?" These questions offer the patient the important

opportunity to discuss his health situation. The patient can respond at any level he wishes, and the visitor can readily follow that lead.

Many visitors shy away from making visits to terminally ill patients because of fear of accidentally saying something that will suddenly upset the patient or make the patient realize the gravity of his situation. We should be aware that natural psychological defense mechanisms tend to insulate the patient from any such shock. Patients who are not capable of dealing openly with the fact of their impending death will very likely block out even straightforward attempts to give them that information. Most health practitioners agree that terminally ill patients are a good deal stronger psychologically than many of us assume. On the whole it is far crueler to deprive the patient of important human contact at this time than to risk the rare instance in which a visitor's well-meaning comment might result in some disturbance to the patient.

When the patient does not wish to discuss health further, the visitor should discuss matters that are normally of interest to the particular patient. This will provide some normalcy for the patient, and will emphasize that there is more to the patient than just his medical condition.

4. Helping the Family:

One contemporary aspect of terminal illness, which perhaps calls for a change in traditional focus, is the fact that nowadays terminally ill patients are often subject to powerful medication and around-the-clock medical attention. This often puts the patient in a state where he is almost beyond the ability to be helped or affected by even the most well meaning of visitors. At the same time, the patient's family is often sidelined and ignored, although it is frequently in even greater distress.

So today we should see our obligation of visiting the sick as extended to visiting also with the family of the terminally ill. In doing so, we should bear in mind certain natural psychological consequences to the family of a terminally ill patient. Family members are not only grief-stricken but are often burdened by (and at the same time horrified by the fact that they have) various feelings of guilt or anger about the terminally ill patient. The family naturally feels some ambivalence about the period of terminal illness, with its attendant and seemingly meaningless pain, suffering, and expense. While the visitor is not expected to be a therapist, the visitor's awareness of these common psychological pressures and a willingness to give an understanding ear to the concerns that may be expressed by the family can be important to the family in helping them understand that their feelings are normal and natural, and not inappropriate or disloyal. If a family is in significant distress at this time, it would be a wonderful thing for a visitor who has any influence with them to have them seek professional psychological help. Crisis intervention counseling can be extremely important, especially as it may help the family maintain its ability to interact fully with each other and with the patient during this important time. A call to the VBS Counseling Center can bring critical help in such a situation.

B. Advance Funeral and Burial Arrangements

One area of lifetime consideration that should not be left until the stage of terminal illness is purchasing, in advance of need, a burial plot, and perhaps also funeral services. Such advance arrangements provide several advantages. Most important, perhaps, is to free the surviving family from the distressing burdens of making those decisions at their time of grief. Making one's own advance arrangements allows each individual to exercise his or her own judgments about these matters, rather than forcing the family later to guess what would have been desired. Advance arrangements also permit a family to make a collective decision, perhaps securing a group of family burial plots. Finally, there may be significant economic advantages to making advance arrangements. Burial plots or funeral services can be obtained at present prices, often at a substantial discount over prices in effect in later years. An installment payment plan may be available which permits easy budgeting for the purchase. The family will also be freed from the economic burden of providing funds at the time of death.

The VBS Cemetery Committee offers counseling and assistance to VBS members in arranging for cemetery properties and funeral services. In particular, the Committee maintains an inventory of burial plots in the VBS sections at Eden Memorial Park-Mission Hills, and Mount Sinai Memorial Park-Simi Valley that are available for pre-need purchase by VBS members at very favorable prices and terms. For more information contact Malcolm Katz, VBS Executive Director, at 818-530-4004. Similar advance arrangements for funeral services can be made with many of the Los Angeles area Jewish funeral directors.

Part 3-Mourning and Condolence

A. Who Are the "Mourners" Under Jewish Law?

Turning now to the questions of actual mourning and condolence, the first issue is to distinguish between the small family group of mourners and the larger community whose task it is to console and support them.

In Jewish tradition, the obligation of formal mourning is restricted to seven relationships: spouse, father, mother, son, daughter, brother or sister. For the death of these relatives, one observes the formal [Shivah](#) mourning period, says [Kaddish](#), observes the [Yahrzeit](#) anniversary, and attends [Yizkor](#) memorial services in later years. As used in this booklet, the term "mourners" or "family" will generally refer to these seven mourning relationships.

Even this clear classification has undergone some changes and development in our history. Initially, only children had the obligation of formal mourning, and the Kaddish memorial prayer was known as the "*Kaddish Yatom*"—the Orphan's Kaddish. Subsequently the class of mourners was broadened to include the presently recognized seven relationships. Even today, however, mourning for parents is still regarded as a special situation. Formal mourning observances for all mourners proceed through defined stages, but the practices observed for other relationships for a 30-day [Sheloshim](#) period are observed for one year (actually, eleven months) in the case of the death of a parent. Obviously, contemporary recognition of mourning for parents as a special category is due to historical differences in practice, and the Fifth Commandment to honor one's parents, and is not meant to imply a difference in the duration or intensity of the grief feelings for the other mourning relationships.

Of course, today many others also wish to join in expressing their loss upon a death. Where the quality of lifetime relationships with a decedent warrants it, sons-in-law, daughters-in-law or grandchildren sometimes formally mourn the death of an in-law or a grandparent. Certainly, a major theme of this booklet is the recognition that the extended family, Havurah, friends and congregation at large have a very significant role to play in the mourning process.

B. The Immediate Decisions Required Upon a Death

Immediately after the death, a mourner becomes an [Onen](#), a person with unique status in the Jewish community. Jewish tradition recognizes that such mourners are in a condition of great emotional distress and shock—so much so that they are temporarily excused from all personal, religious, and community obligations. Their sole duty during

the period between the death and the funeral is to make the burial and funeral arrangements.

The important questions that the surviving family must deal with immediately following the death include notifying the community, care of the body until the funeral, autopsy, donation of body organs, selection of the coffin, arrangements for the burial, the time of the funeral, and the content of the funeral services. These are all discussed in detail below.

1. Notifications:

One of the first matters to be taken care of is to begin the process of notifying the community. This is mandated by our tradition's insistence that both the mourners and the community at large have important roles to play in connection with the death.

(a) The Synagogue:

A single call to the Valley Beth Shalom office will serve many functions. The Rabbis and Pararabbinics will be notified so that they can be available to help. The synagogue office will also thereby be able to serve as a community information source. The office will share the funeral details with the VBS online community, and also will respond to synagogue members who often call the synagogue office to verify information about reported deaths.

(i) Our VBS Rabbis: The initial call to the VBS office is critical because the Rabbis will be immediately notified, so that they can be available to the family. The scheduling of the funeral depends upon a rabbi's availability, so it is important to explore the scheduling availability without delay. The Rabbis will also be available to speak with the family during the difficult time immediately after the death, as well as to answer any questions about specific Jewish customs.

(ii) Our VBS Pararabbinics: After the initial call is made to the VBS office, a specially trained and experienced VBS Pararabbinic counselor will call the member family and be available to them throughout the burial and *Shivah* period to answer questions about customs, funeral arrangements, coffin selection, and to offer any other needed information and support in connection with the entire process.

(b) The Funeral Director:

As detailed below, engaging a Jewish funeral director is another important first step, which will lead to much helpful information and assistance. In this connection, many families have found that it is very important before reaching decisions about the funeral to have the independent counsel and assistance of someone knowledgeable about authentic Jewish tradition and contemporary funeral practices. VBS offers its members the coordinated assistance of our Rabbis and Pararabbinics for this purpose.

(c) Friends and Relatives:

Notifying friends or relatives can often be a burdensome task. The Havurah or other close friends should volunteer to make these calls. Obviously, it will be helpful if the time and place of the funeral arrangements have been worked out with the Rabbis and the Funeral Director first, so that all of the information can be given to friends and relatives at one time. Especially where there is no prior personal relationship between the caller and the party being notified, these calls should be kept brief and simple, and extensive discussion about the deceased's medical history and the emotional or financial state of the family should be avoided. The basic information could be given as follows:

"I'm afraid I have some sad information about the _____ family.
_____ died on _____ (day). The cause of death was _____.
The funeral will be held on _____ at _____."

Depending on the nature of the response, it may also be appropriate for the caller to indicate that the family is being cared for by close friends or relatives so that general visiting at the house before the funeral would not be appropriate; or what, if any, foods would be welcome at the house after the funeral; or the telephone number where additional information can be obtained later.

(d) Attorney:

The decedent's attorney should also be contacted promptly. The attorney may have information about pre-need arrangements, burial instructions or other Will provisions, and can answer any initial questions about probate procedures or other legal matters.

2. Care of the Body Until the Funeral:

(a) The Funeral Director:

The funeral director will arrange to call for the body at the home or the hospital and to care for the body until the funeral. The Jewish funeral director is also an important source of help and information concerning state and local legal requirements and the available choices regarding coffins and cemeteries. Funeral directors should not, however, be relied upon to determine questions of religious law or authentic tradition; such questions should be referred to the synagogue's Rabbis or Pararabbinics.

(b) Making the Decisions:

It is important to recognize that the family of the deceased is often in a state of shock and confusion immediately after the death. Besides the shock, common immediate psychological reactions to the death of a loved one often include strong feelings of denial, guilt, and anger, which themselves are often suppressed and denied. This is obviously not a good time to be making substantial economic decisions regarding the funeral. Thus, one of the most important services which a close friend or relative can render is to accompany and counsel the family regarding the purchase of mortuary and cemetery services if these have not already been arranged for on a pre-need basis. If needed, the VBS Pararabbinic counselors are also available to help.

(c) Preparation of the Body:

Included among the services performed by the funeral director during this initial period is to see to the ritual preparation of the body for burial. The body is ritually washed in a rite of purification (“*Taharah*”) and clothed in a linen burial shroud and a [Talit](#) (but with one of the [Tzitzit](#)—corner fringes—cut off to signify that the deceased is no longer subject to *mitzvot* obligations). The body is not dressed in formal or favorite clothes, and is not made up cosmetically. The purpose of dressing in the traditional burial shroud is to recognize that finally all distinctions between rich and poor, fortunate and unfortunate, are obliterated in the common end of mankind. Fancy clothes and cosmetics are an unhealthy attempt to deny the reality of death and are a religiously improper attempt to glorify the lifeless corpse. Instead, we should reserve attention and concern for the spirit, soul, life, and influence of the deceased, which was the essence of the deceased’s humanity—and divinity.

The body should be attended at all times, as a mark of respect for the deceased and in recognition of the deceased’s utterly helpless state. The immediate family may want to spend some time in the presence of the body; at other times a watcher (“*Shomer*”) should be in attendance. However, it is not generally regarded as ritually appropriate or psychologically sound for friends to visit at or spend the night at the funeral home.

In our tradition, the functions of washing, dressing and attending to the body until the funeral are regarded as a special honor. Traditionally, these functions have been reserved for pious community members who formed themselves into burial societies called “*Chevra Kadisha*”. Today, for Conservative Jews, these functions are typically performed by the funeral director.

3. Autopsy:

Conservative Judaism does not generally approve of autopsies, or of providing cadavers for general medical teaching or experimentation. These actions are incompatible with Judaism’s insistence upon reverence for the human body as having been the receptacle of the divine soul. Of course, Jewish law permits a medical autopsy when absolutely required by applicable civil law. (In California, the County Coroner’s Office has the authority to order an autopsy when necessary to determine the cause of death.) A voluntary autopsy may also be appropriate if it could be medically significant—for example, to learn about health conditions that could have implications for the rest of the family or for persons suffering from similar conditions. Judaism judges such matters under the standard of the general overriding obligation to save lives. However, it should be emphasized that questions regarding autopsy should not be resolved solely by the family or medical authorities. The Rabbis should be consulted on all such issues.

4. Donation of Body Organs:

It is important to recognize that many of the Jewish traditions about burial arose during the post-biblical period in connection with the belief in the physical resurrection of the dead. This belief generated great concern for accounting for all body parts and organs. Today, many Conservative Jews instead focus their concerns in this area upon respect

for the deceased as being a helpless and dependent member of society, and for the human body as having been the receptacle of the divine soul. Moreover, Jewish values give precedence to the saving of lives. Therefore, the donation of body tissues or organs for the purpose of saving the lives or health of others is not objectionable on religious grounds to most Jews today. However, it is still important to insist that the body be treated with the utmost respect, and that all unused tissue, blood and organs be returned for burial with the body.

California has laws (Uniform Anatomical Gift Act, Health & S.C. Sections 7150 - 7157) governing donation of body parts. For both legal and practical purposes, individuals desiring to make such donations should make advance lifetime arrangements, both by means of signing the legal donation form (a symbol of for which can be affixed to a driver's license) and under special circumstances by arranging with a hospital or other health organization for receipt of the donation.

5. Coffin:

The traditional Jewish coffin is a simple, plain wooden coffin made of pine or other readily available wood. Wood is used because it permits the coffin to decompose at generally the same rate as the body and its linen shroud, permitting all to return to the earth. However, metal handles, hinges, screws or nails are permissible. Fastening the coffin with wooden pegs instead of nails or screws is not required by contemporary practice.

Exotic, elaborate or decorative woods, metal caskets or vaults, and fine linings or hardware should be shunned, as these would convert respect for the deceased into unseemly ostentation. We should also remember that well-to-do families in our community have an obligation to embrace uniform burial arrangements so as not to embarrass less fortunate families who cannot afford more elaborate materials. Arranging to purchase the coffin in advance of need will avoid emotional pressures on the family that might otherwise result in the purchase of an excessively elaborate and expensive coffin.

Where local regulations due to ground conditions require, cement vaults or grave covers or liners may be used. However, the Rabbi's advice about such matters should be obtained.

6. Burial or Cremation:

The Jewish way is burial in the ground. This tradition expresses thousands of years of deeply felt opposition to unhealthy and unnatural worship of the dead. It is a solemn recognition that without the spark of divine soul and human intelligence, the body is simply a part of nature, which must be allowed to be subject to the universal natural processes of decay and return to the dust of the earth. No "modern" views of ecological or personal taste considerations should be permitted to override this central tenet of Jewish ritual belief. Although entombment above the ground is not uncommon in recent years, it is generally agreed that burial in the ground remains truer to the tradition.

Moreover, embalming processes are permitted only if necessary to preserve the body until the burial.

It should be emphasized that cremation is unquestionably unacceptable to Conservative Judaism. The process of cremation would substitute an artificial and “instant” destruction for the natural process of decay and would have the disposition of the remains subject to manipulation by the survivors rather than submit to the universal processes of nature.

Burial should be in a Jewish cemetery (one operated under Jewish auspices and reserved for burial of Jews). Indeed, it is one of the first obligations of any Jewish community to establish a Jewish cemetery. (One of the first acts of the Los Angeles Jewish community was the establishment of the Chavez Ravine Jewish Cemetery in 1855.)

Two thousand years ago, at the time of the Temple, contact with a dead body by a [Kohen](#) (priest) would render him ritually impure and unfit to serve in the Temple. Some present-day *Kohenim* (pl.) still avoid entering a cemetery in commemoration of this custom. Others enter the cemetery but stay at the back of the funeral party and avoid approaching the grave. Many others no longer regard the special restrictions upon Kohenim as applicable today. If this issue is of concern, the Rabbis should be consulted.

7. Time of Funeral:

As a mark of honor to the deceased and perhaps also as an appropriate response to the psychological needs of the family, the funeral is traditionally held as soon as possible. Although in earliest times the funeral was held on the day of the death, it is now appropriate to allow a day or two delay in order to permit distant family and friends to attend. The funeral must be scheduled with some care. Funerals are not permissible on [Shabbat](#) or certain holidays. Moreover, the Rabbis may have conflicting obligations and are not available at all times. Thus, it is not sufficient to arrange for a time that is available with the funeral director and mortuary. The scheduling of the funeral must always be confirmed in advance with the Rabbi.

8. Funeral Services:

Traditional Jewish funeral services follow the dual principles of respect for the deceased but avoiding any improper worship of the body. The coffin is not to be open at any time, as the dead body is no longer able to participate in social interaction. It is wrong to display the body as a “thing” to be observed.

Flowers are not used, because the funeral is not a time for decoration or physical beauty. Flowers have also developed a strong Christian theological significance that makes them especially inappropriate at a Jewish funeral. Friends who would otherwise send flowers should be encouraged instead to make a donation to a charity in which the deceased or the mourning family has been interested. The family may wish to designate

a particular memorial fund (under the VBS Foundation or similar charity) for this purpose.

Arrangements regarding the content and format of the funeral service should be worked out with the Rabbis or the Pararabbinics. The funeral service itself is discussed below in greater detail.

C. The Roles of the Mourners and the Community Between the Death and the Funeral

The time between the death and the funeral is the time for making the immediate arrangements discussed above. This time period is to be kept as short as practicable, consistent with permitting the family and friends to attend the funeral.

During this time period, mourning by the family or condolence by the community is suspended. According to the wisdom of our tradition, it is meaningless to attempt to comfort a mourner until the deceased has been buried. Psychologically, this is a very sound outlook, as the mourners are generally in a condition of shock, denial, numbness, and confusion during the period immediately after the death. Much of the funeral service marks the beginning of “letting go” (acceptance of the reality of death), and effective mourning cannot be begun before that. Thus, the general community should not pay condolence visits at the home or the funeral parlor before the funeral. Of course, close family or friends should be available to the mourners throughout this time to offer their presence, comfort and assistance. The Havurah or other close friends could also help during this time by contacting relatives and friends to notify them of the funeral arrangements.

Often it is very helpful if one or two persons act as coordinators and as contact persons for the community, to ensure that appropriate arrangements for food or other assistance are made without wasteful duplication. Also one person, generally a close friend or relative, should be available to accompany the family for the difficult task of selecting a coffin, burial location and other funeral arrangements if pre-need arrangement have not already been made.

D. The Basic Elements Of The Funeral Service

1. Who Attends:

The funeral service has the double function of honor to the deceased and honor to the bereaved. Thus it should be attended by friends of either the deceased or the mourning family. Children should not be shielded from this experience and from their own grief. The funeral service is an important commentary on the Jewish view of life, as well as death, and children should not be kept ignorant of this part of their tradition. If there are any questions about the role for any particular child, the officiating Rabbi should be consulted.

2. Funeral Service:

At the funeral service, under the direction of the officiating Rabbi, it is customary to recite a Psalm, read a passage from the Scriptures, and chant the memorial prayer, *El Moleh Rachamim*. Although this service is typically held at the chapel adjacent to the burial grounds, this is not required, and the prayer service can be held at the gravesite.

3. Seating:

In some localities a custom has arisen to have the family separated from those attending the service by seating the family in a curtained-off alcove. This practice is probably supposed to permit the family to cry or otherwise express their grief out of the view of the congregation. However, it is clearly wrong to make the family or the community feel that crying or other natural expressions of grief are shameful or must be stifled. The practice of hiding or segregating the mourners is not a traditional Jewish one, and it is preferable if the family is simply seated in the first pews of the chapel during the service. It is not, however, appropriate for those attending to use this occasion to attempt to greet or comfort the mourners until after the funeral and burial.

4. Coffin:

The prayer service is held in the presence of the coffin, although the coffin should be closed at all times, and unadorned by flowers or other decorations. VBS can furnish its members an appropriate cloth covering for the coffin, if desired.

5. Eulogy:

In earlier times, the giving of a eulogy (a short speech extolling the virtues or community contributions of the deceased) was reserved only for great scholars or other outstanding members of the Jewish community. This practice gradually became generalized, and it is currently customary in all cases to have some words stated in praise of the positive qualities or accomplishments of the deceased. The eulogy should be kept within reasonable bounds of time and extent of praise, and the omission of any eulogy is certainly preferable to one that is embarrassingly immodest, effusive, or untrue. In advance of the funeral service the officiating Rabbi will meet with the family to discuss themes and ideas to incorporate into the Rabbi's eulogy.

A relatively recent practice has developed of having close family members and friends share in the delivery of a eulogy. Sometimes reminiscences about the deceased's life and declarations of the deceased's influence on the speaker (for example, an adult grandchild) can provide a unique and moving testimony at the funeral. For help in this, see [Rabbi Ed Feinstein's article, "How to Prepare A Eulogy"](#), in the "Further Resources" section below.

However, where a mourner's attempt to speak at the funeral is likely to be marred by an emotional struggle or inability to speak, it is preferable to impart the information to the officiating Rabbi in advance so that it can be woven into the Rabbi's eulogy without disrupting the funeral service. In no event should any mourner feel pressured to speak

at the funeral if that could be uncomfortable for him or her. It may be more comfortable to reserve remembrances by family and friends for *minyón* services held at home during the *Shivah* week following the funeral.

6. Music:

The funeral service is often enhanced by having the Cantor sing the traditional memorial prayer, *El Moleh Rachamim*. Other possible cantonal selections could be arranged with the Rabbi and Cantor. Organ, piano or violin accompaniment is not traditionally used.

7. Pallbearing:

It is traditional to name six or eight people (not the immediate mourners) who were close to the decedent to serve as the actual pallbearers, to help carry the coffin from the services to the gravesite. In some cases, physical strength is necessary for some portions of this duty. Honorary pallbearers may also be announced if there are more than six or eight who should share the honor of being named, or for those too young, old or physically infirm to assist.

8. Gravesite Service:

After the prayer service at the chapel, those attending file out and proceed to the gravesite. The coffin is taken there by hearse or cart, with the family accompanying. The pallbearers then carry the coffin to the gravesite. At the gravesite, the Rabbi leads the balance of the prayer service, which generally includes *Keriah* (tearing clothing) and the mourners' recitation of the *Kaddish*.

(a) Keriah (Tearing Clothing):

The ceremony of [Keriah](#)—the rending (tearing) of clothing by the mourners—symbolizes their grief and loss, and is probably an institutionalized substitute for the primitive custom of physical self-mutilation of skin, hair, or clothing. Originally, the *Keriah* practice took the form of tearing an article of clothing (on the left side for a parent or on the right side for others). More recently a practice has developed of cutting a small black ribbon, which can then be worn attached to the clothing. By following the original practice of actually tearing an article of clothing, mourners might have a better feeling of authenticity and connection with a cherished tradition of the past. In either event, the Rabbi officiates at the actual tearing or cutting.

(b) Kaddish:

It has often been commented upon that the mourners' [Kaddish](#) prayer contains no reference to death; it is a prayer of praise and sanctification of God. The spirit of the prayer is one of almost defiant declaration of faith—that despite the tragedy of the loss, the mourners still publicly declare their steadfast belief in the Kingdom of God and a world of peace and goodness. Some have seen the *Kaddish* as man's attempt to console God for the diminution of God's universe resulting from the death. [Click here for the text of the Kaddish prayer.](#)

(c) Filling the Grave:

At the conclusion of the service the coffin is physically lowered into the grave. It is important that this be done in the presence of the mourners. The sight of the actual interment is important for the “letting go,” and acceptance of the fact of death without fantasy or illusion.

The family and persons attending the funeral each place some dirt into the grave, onto the coffin. This is usually done with a shovel. Thus, each of us personally fulfills the obligation to bury the dead. The finality of this act further expresses for all the acceptance of the reality of the loss of the body and the termination of the prior life-relationship with the deceased.

(d) Leaving the Cemetery:

At the close of the services, the mourners return to the car, to be taken to the home at which *Shivah* will be observed. Those attending form two lines and the mourners pass between them on their way out of the cemetery. Now that the burial has been concluded, the process of consoling the mourners can begin, so for the first time the persons attending speak to the mourners, saying as they pass, “*Ha’makom yenachem et’chem b’toch shear avelei tziyon vi’Yerushalayim*” (May God comfort you together with all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem).

E. The First Meal After The Funeral

The end of the funeral service and the beginning of the formal *Shivah* period of mourning are marked by the “*Seudat Havra’ah*”—the Meal of Consolation. The family and those attending the funeral service return to the home (preferably the home of the deceased or else the closest related family member).

A pitcher of water, a basin and paper towels should be located outside the entrance so that before entering the home, all returning from the funeral can wash their hands, by pouring water from the pitcher. The washing may signify the transition from the funeral, with its focus upon the deceased, to the mourning period, with its focus upon consolation for the family.

The first act of that consolation is the Meal of Consolation, shared by all who return from the funeral service. This meal should not be prepared, or even procured, by the mourners. Instead, under our tradition, neighbors and friends should furnish this meal (and all other meals of the *Shivah* period). Currently it would be highly appropriate for the Havurah (or other friends) to make these arrangements. The VBS Sisterhood should be contacted for assistance in preparation of the food if family and friends are unable to furnish meals.

The purpose of the first meal is to ritualize the obligation for the living survivors to carry on with their lives, however deep the loss. Unlike a “wake” or other practices of some other religions, the meal is not a celebration. There is no host or hostess, and it is not a party. It is not intended to celebrate the deceased or to cheer up the mourners, but

rather to bring the gentle pressure of the community to encourage the mourners to begin their long and difficult re-entry into normal society. There are no special prayers said as part of this meal. Hard-boiled eggs are traditionally part of the food, probably to symbolize life, wholeness, and continuity. The balance of the meal today typically consists of baked goods and other foods, served buffet style. Some families follow the tradition of serving a dairy meal. The *Kashrut* (observance of Kosher foods restrictions) practices of the family and visitors should be respected.

F. The Shivah

The initial portion of the formal mourning period is called [*Shivah*](#) (Hebrew: seven), and is essentially a period of time, approximately seven days from the day of the funeral, which is set aside for intensive mourning by the family. It is also the period that marks the beginnings of the mourners' gradual return to society.

1. Roles of the Mourners and Visitors:

People observe *Shivah* (“sit” *Shivah*) at a designated house (usually the house of the decedent, or otherwise the closest related mourner). The mourners stay there (except for leaving at night to sleep at their own homes, where necessary), and the community pays condolence visits and also attends morning and evening prayer services there.

Unlike the funeral, the essence of the *Shivah* is not to pay honor to the deceased, but to give comfort and assistance to the mourners. The mourners are required by the situation to receive visits from caring and loving friends and acquaintances, whose presence helps to strengthen the mourners and to re-establish their connection with society.

The visitor is not supposed to take the initiative in conversing with the mourners, but to let the mere fact of the visitor's presence provide the comfort of human companionship and compassion. Instead of the typical greetings (“Good to see you” or “[*Shalom*](#)” are both obviously inappropriate), the visitor need not initiate any greeting whatsoever. This was the early tradition, especially during the first three days of the *Shivah* period. However, if the relationship warrants it, the visitor can approach the mourners to express by a hug or a few words the visitor's feelings of sorrow. The visitor should follow the mourner's lead in conversation, understanding that the process does not call for attempting to “cheer up” the mourners, or distract them from their grief.

The mourners often want to talk about and hear stories about the deceased and the deceased's influence on those present. This marks the important second part of the mourning process. In the first part, “letting go,” we give up the defense mechanism of denial, and accept the reality of death. In the second part, “holding on,” we incorporate into our lives the memories and positive influences of the decedent.

Visitors, especially if they were close to the decedent or the mourners, or if they live conveniently near the home, may return each day of the *Shivah* to help make up the [*minyan*](#) for the morning and evening services. Again, it would be especially appropriate

for the Havurah to undertake this as part of their special relationship. Books for these services will be provided by VBS. The Rabbi, Ritual Director, Pararabbinic counselors, and general members of our VBS community are available to help the *minyan* participate in the service. For more information about the visitor's role at the Shivah, see [Dr. Ron Wolfson's article on "The Art of Making a Shivah Call"](#) in the "Further Resources" section below.

2. The Psychology of Shivah:

It is important to understand the development of the mourning process during the *Shivah* period. The period is properly one of transition. According to modern psychological studies, the few days immediately following the death (especially where the death was sudden and unexpected or the family was psychologically unprepared) are ones of shock, denial, and numbness. (In Jewish tradition, one should not even attempt to comfort the mourner until after the burial and funeral, and thereafter the first 3 days of Shivah are assumed to be of the most intense sort of grief.) Psychologists note that this initial period of several days of shock is followed by a period of acute and intensive mourning that generally gradually diminishes over approximately three to six months (or longer, in some cases). Their studies further show that this is followed by a period of re-adjustment and return to normalcy, which often lasts the remainder of the first year (or longer, in some cases) following the death. It is remarkable how the ancient Jewish traditions of mourning correspond to these most modern psychological insights into grief and the mourning processes.

Progress in this transition of grieving does not occur in a straight line, however. Most people who have experienced it describe it as recurring waves of deep feelings, interspersed with ever-lengthening periods of "normal" thoughts and behavior. But just as the visitor must not expect the *Shivah* period to be a seven-day period of continuous and unremitting solemnity, so also the visitor should not trivialize the occasion by converting the condolence call into a cocktail party-type of social event at which discussions of business and current events and gossip are all allowed. The visitor at the home of the *Shivah* observance is not there to entertain or to be entertained. Only if vulgarity and thoughtlessness are avoided, can the visitor's presence fulfill its historic and important function of consoling and strengthening the mourners.

3. Time Period:

The period of the *Shivah* is not exactly seven days. Although the funeral is often held in late morning or afternoon, the day of the funeral counts as a full day. The "second" day starts at sundown of the day of the funeral, and the regular *Shivah* period is completed with the morning of the seventh day (rather than waiting until the evening). For example, if the funeral were held at noon on a Monday, the regular *Shivah* period would conclude after the morning services on the following Sunday. Although public mourning practices are not observed on the [Shabbat](#), it still counts as one day of the *Shivah* period.

However, the occurrence of certain Jewish holidays (other than Shabbat) during the regular *Shivah* period terminates the period (on the theory that the public obligation to

participate in the festival observance must take priority over private grief. The timing of the *Shivah* period should be determined by the Rabbi when the funeral is planned.

4. Mourners' Activities:

During the *Shivah* period, the mourners are expected to ignore their normal social and business activities and obligations, in order to devote themselves fully to the business of mourning. The mourners are excused from all work. (In cases of genuine economic hardship or medical or public service responsibilities, some exceptions are possible, especially after the first three days, but these should be discussed with the Rabbi.)

Because a human form has just been lost, any vanities regarding the human form are barred during *Shivah*. This is expressed by putting aside normal concerns for personal appearance: Mirrors are covered, cosmetics are not used, and in traditional observance, men do not shave and only the minimal bathing necessary for hygiene is performed.

During the *Shivah* period the mourners avoid recreation, entertainment or pleasurable activities (radio, television, music, reading for entertainment, etc.). Marital relations are abstained from. However, there is to be no mortification of the flesh or self-injury. For example, the mourners may cook for themselves, if necessary, and do light housekeeping and hygienic bathing, and may read serious works of consolation.

The mourners traditionally sit on low benches, and wear slippers rather than shoes, perhaps as a means of expressing distinction from everyday activities and luxuries.

5. Candle:

Traditionally, a 7-day candle is lit upon the return from the funeral and kept burning during *Shivah*. The candle flame is thought to symbolize the everlasting influence of the soul of the deceased. The Funeral Director generally furnishes the 7-day candle as part of the service.

6. Gifts:

Visitors should not bring or send flowers, candy, or liquor to the home. Instead, the appropriate way of expressing such feelings is for the visitor to make a contribution to a charity in which the deceased or the mourners have been interested. Bringing food for the mourners is appropriate, but individual efforts in this area should be coordinated so that there is no waste or excess.

7. Shabbat:

Unlike other festival days, Shabbat does not shorten the *Shivah* period. However, public mourning observances are suspended on Shabbat, and there are no prayer services held at the home. The community does not pay condolence calls. On the other hand, private mourning continues. The mourners attend Shabbat services at the synagogue.

G. The Sheloshim Period

Following the Jewish traditional arrangement of gradual transitional periods for mourning (which closely parallel modern psychological studies of the grief process), the balance of the 30-day period from the funeral remaining after the conclusion of *Shivah* becomes a period of reduced mourning, called *Sheloshim* (Hebrew: thirty). Although the mourner returns to work at the end of the *Shivah*, the restrictions against attending celebrations, entertainment events or listening to music continue for the balance of *Sheloshim*.

H. Mourning Observances For Deceased Parents

We have already noted how the rending of garments is performed differently for parents (when it is done of the left side—closer to the heart). Traditionally, the general *Shivah* prohibition against shaving was extended into the *Sheloshim* period for parents.

In addition, the general restrictions of *Sheloshim* (the prohibitions against entertainment) are extended to twelve months (according to the Jewish calendar) when mourning for a parent. It is again interesting to note that this one-year period of extended mourning for parents parallels the one-year period commonly stated in con-temporary psychological literature as the approximate period often required for termination of the normal grief process.

Also, persons mourning a parent continue to say the Mourners' *Kaddish* prayer at every service for eleven months. Originally, the limitation of *Kaddish* to eleven, rather than twelve, months was to signify that the deceased parent, being a good person, did not need a whole year of prayer to avoid divine punishment. In contemporary times, the limitation to eleven months may be more meaningfully seen as an expression of the need to put an end to mourning. Indeed, the whole Jewish mourning system of time periods (before the funeral, the first three days of *Shivah*, the balance of *Shivah*, *Sheloshim*, and the first year for parents), each with its own level of mourning practices, can be seen as insistence upon limitations on the extent of mourning. Under Jewish law, excessive mourning is prohibited; the primary obligation is not to the dead, but always to the self, to the community, to life.

I. The Customs Of Later Remembrance.

Even after the conclusion of the formal mourning periods, Judaism recognizes in many ways the reality and permanence of the mourner's loss.

1. *Tombstone and Unveiling:*

Just as with other elements of the burial ceremonies, the tombstone should not become an instance of elaborate ostentation. It should bear a simple inscription of the name and date of death. It is appropriate to erect the stone no sooner than 30 days and up to 12 months after the death.

It is currently customary for the family to gather for an “[unveiling](#)” ceremony for this purpose near the first anniversary after the death. This can be an occasion for the family

to share their remembrances, and does not require the presence of a rabbi or cantor. For help in this, see [Rabbi Ed Feinstein's article, "How to Do an Unveiling Ceremony"](#), in the "Further Resources" section below.

2. *Yahrzeit*:

The anniversary of the death is commemorated each year by [Yahrzeit](#), a day of prayer and remembrance. The mourner recites the Mourners *Kaddish* at services. A 24-hour candle is also lit in the home (beginning on the evening before the *Yahrzeit* day). The *Yahrzeit* day is determined according to the Hebrew calendar, taking into account that the Hebrew calendar day begins at sundown. Any difficulties in determining the appropriate *Yahrzeit* day should be resolved by the Rabbis. VBS or the Funeral Director will be able to furnish the mourners with a schedule of *Yahrzeit* days for the coming years.

3. *Yizkor*:

A special memorial ([Yizkor](#)) service is held at the Synagogue on the eighth day of Pesach, the second day of Shavuot, the eighth day of Succot, and on Yom Kippur. Those who have lost a parent, sibling, child, or spouse participate in this service. At VBS, as in most Synagogues, the entire congregation likewise participates in the *Yizkor* services, which speak meaningfully about the condition of life to all of us, and not just to mourners.

4. *Naming a Child*:

It is an [Ashkenazi](#) traditional to name a child after a deceased relative in order to perpetuate the memory and to express hope that the positive qualities of the deceased find expression in the child's life. The [Sephardi](#) practice, however, is to name a child after a living relative.

Part 4-The Psychology and Jewish Philosophy of Mourning

A. The Psychological Stages Of Mourning

1. The Mourning Process:

This booklet has previously detailed the various psychological phases that the close family of the deceased must pass through as part of the mourning process. Essentially, mourning is a process of re-entry, re-identification, and re-establishment of a relationship with a world and a self left so greatly altered by the loss of the deceased. Although individual reactions obviously will differ in different cases, sociological and psychological studies have been able to establish certain typical stages through which people generally pass in their mourning. Initially, there is generally a numbness, paralysis or shock, especially in those cases where there has been a lack of psychological preparation for the death. As the capacity to think and feel is gradually restored, the mourner often feels a whole range of sometimes shocking or embarrassing feelings, such as anger towards the deceased, guilt for real or imagined wrongs done towards the deceased, outrage, panic, despair, or self-pity. What is important for the mourner and those trying to console the mourner to realize is that these initial feelings are natural and normal. The mourner should not be made to feel that he should “snap out of it” or that it is somehow wrong to feel the guilt and anger that are so typically a part of the mourning process. (As has been pointed out, Jewish mourning customs recognize and accommodate these feelings.)

Once the funeral has occurred and the condolence process truly begun, there should be a gradual reestablishment of relationship of the mourner with the family and the community. Again, this process takes time, and does not occur in a straight line. The typical experience feels like a series of waves in which the mourner makes progress for a while in the normalization of feelings and responses, but is suddenly overwhelmed by extreme grief. The mourning process, indeed, can be seen as simply a lengthening of the period of time between those waves of overwhelming grief. The goal of the mourning process is not to forget but to re-establish working and living relationships, and to develop a consistent pattern of memories and feelings towards the deceased. The mourning process should help us integrate those memories and feelings into our lives.

2. Relationships Within the Family:

One aspect of the mourning process that is very often ignored is the effect on the psychological inter-relationships among the mourning family members. Mourning is often described by surviving family members as a uniquely personal and solitary experience. After the death of a child, parents frequently state that however fine and close their marital relationship was, they were struck by how individual their mourning

responses had to be, and how disappointed they were when they looked to the other spouse for substantial assistance in the mourning process. Each of the parents apparently finds that he or she must mourn for the child alone, and cannot look to the other for the kind of help they may have presumed would be there.

Likewise, it is apparently a common experience that young children in a mourning family generally feel neglected and excluded, even though the adults may believe that they are going out of their way to share the experience with the children. Again this seems to be a result of the differences between expectations and the reality of the situation. Because the mourning experience is so intensely personal, children will be disappointed if they expect that any adults can effectively share the mourning experience or help in the mourning experience by way of education or co-activity.

Clearly, to state these general experiences is not to declare invariable rules or suggest that the situation is hopeless. However, the family and supporting friends should be especially vigilant to recognize these pressures. We should all be aware that significant forces are at work and that continuity of the surviving family, whether it is the marital relationship or involving children, may require special attention and, where appropriate, referral to professional help.

3. Relationships With the Community:

Once past the initial intense mourning of the *Shivah* period, the mourners often find that their relationships with outside members of the community have undergone substantial change. Very often friends or family members feel they cannot re-establish normal relationships with the mourners either because the friends themselves have intense mourning and grieving which is too disturbing, or because of a general awkwardness or feeling of fear that they will be saying the wrong thing and upset the mourner.

When there is death of a spouse, the survivor is also faced with all of the general pressures on a single adult in a society geared to a couples lifestyle. Where there is loss of a young child, very often many of the adult family relationships were previously based upon two families having children of the same age who were companions. Moreover, friends may feel awkward about having healthy and surviving children of their own, which may make them feel uncomfortable in continuing their relationships with the family of the deceased child.

It is important for people to understand the pressures under which not only the mourning family but also the community of friends will be operating. Armed with this knowledge, perhaps friends can be a little more willing to risk occasional tensions and problems in maintaining and re-establishing friendship relations with families who have lost members. The loss of a family member is not a communicable disease, and the surviving family should not be put into social quarantine. Attempts by the Havurah or friends to avoid possible unpleasantness or difficulty may be only an unrealistic attempt to hide themselves from the inevitable, natural fact of death.

4. Excessive Mourning:

There will, of course, be individual differences in mourning experiences and the timing and pacing of different stages and phases of mourning. However, it remains necessary for the family and supporting friends to be alert to the general danger signals of any mourning that becomes excessively intense, lasts too long, or does not go through the normal stages of gradual re-establishment of some normal relationships. In such cases, or for any other reasons where there is a question as to the psychological appropriateness of a mourner's condition, people should not hesitate to consult or to advise consultation with professional help. Sources of that help could be a psychologist or psychiatrist, the VBS Counseling Center, or special community groups designed to help persons in this situation.

VBS, as part of its VBS Counseling Center, periodically sponsors rap groups for widows and widowers between two and eighteen months after their loss, and there are other community groups for bereaved parents and other situations. (For information about the H.O.P.E. Unit Foundation meetings at VBS, [click here: Bereavement Support.](#)) These group programs can be extremely helpful to the survivors, even when no unusual psychological problems have appeared. There are also several helpful books that can be of assistance at an appropriate time.

B. The Jewish Response To The Questions Of Mourning

If there is one single universal reaction to the fact of a death, it is the question "Why?" Why did this person die? Why did this thing happen to me? Why has the decedent been punished? Why am I being punished? A full response to these questions would require a religious treatise of great depth. A booklet such as this can only make a few isolated observations.

Many Jews have great difficulty in accepting as God's will the death of an innocent or good person, or the untimely death of a young adult or an innocent child. The response of some, regrettably, is to lose all faith in God and all fidelity to our religion. Many others, however, see the impossibility of adequate response to such a question not as a cause for disbelief in God, but as a basis for concluding that the question must be wrong.

The question of how could God permit such an injustice presupposes God's active decision and involvement in a particular death. Some Jews can accept the process of death as an extension of the impersonal processes of nature. Accident and circumstance, however horrid their consequences, do not disprove God; they may only suggest a different conception of God. Some Jews feel that if God were assigned a role in everyday events such as individual deaths, this could be done only at the cost of believing in a system in which God had personal responsibility for every detail of human choice. This, in turn, leads to the denial of human responsibility and free will, with the result that humans would lose their special status as creatures of intelligence and choosing, and be reduced to the level of irresponsible things. If death is seen instead as

the consequence of natural processes, human actions, and circumstance, then man's role as a choosing and socially responsible being is preserved.

Other Jews respond to the challenge of the questions which death raises simply by accepting the fact that human understanding is not adequate to the task of dealing with these issues. Such Jews are able to gain comfort and strength by focusing not on the unanswerable questions, but rather upon those things that we know: We know that the deceased lived. We know that the deceased brought to the lives of others around him or her and to the world at large a certain unique personality that touched and changed all those with whom the deceased came in contact. We know that the only way to overcome or minimize the injustice of the deceased's death is to take upon ourselves the holy task of furthering those finest principles and qualities of the deceased, by incorporating them into our lives and actions. We know that to the extent the deceased had contact with us and changed us, the death of the deceased does not have the finality and inevitability of merely a cessation of biological life.

In all of this, the network of Jewish mourning and condolence customs is an extremely important matrix that satisfies the psychological, philosophical and material needs of the mourner and provides many bridges for returning the mourner to society. To understand the philosophical depth of Jewish mourning practices is to understand the dual role of the mourner and the community, mourning and consoling, receiving and giving support.

Out of the collective historical Jewish experience has come an important philosophy of death that is a part of the overall Jewish philosophy of life. Death is part of life. Death is not merely a private experience for those intimately related to the deceased, but is a community loss, with community consequences and communal obligations upon us all to come to the assistance of the deceased and the mourners.

The Jewish system of mourning and condolence customs, despite its ancient sources, parallels remarkably the scheduling of psychological needs as detailed by the latest scientific studies. The Jewish system of beliefs and practices should be seen not as some archaic and irrelevant remnant of history, but as a basic and authentic response system from which we can individually draw strength and gain real support. Judaism has never been a death culture. Many elements of ancient Judaism were formulated as a direct reaction to the death cultures of that time. Our Jewish toast is "*l'chaim*" ("to life!"); the Jewish commitment is to life. We must integrate within our view of life the acceptance of the fact of death.

Most of our negative reactions toward contemporary mourning and condolence customs are not directed towards authentic Jewish customs and beliefs. Rather, our modern discomfort is due to the distortions of various unrelated elements of Jewish, secular, and Christian customs that modern Jews accept without challenge, solely from lack of authentic knowledge. It is hoped that this booklet and the inquiries and study that it may engender will cause all of us to demand of ourselves and the community higher standards of mourning and condolence. In this way we can put an end to those wholly unsatisfactory aspects of contemporary culture such as the opulent funeral, the failures to observe, and the blind, ritualistic observance of actions without philosophical content.

If we join together, these practices can be ended, and more importantly, can be replaced by a revitalized system of authentic Jewish observances appropriately adapted to contemporary needs and conditions. Valley Beth Shalom pledges itself to furnish every possible assistance to all our members in this sacred and vital task.

Part 5-Selected Readings

Our VBS website offers instant access to readings, poetry, and sermons related to the topic of Jewish mourning and condolence.

A. Poetry by Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis

In Sickness and Health:

[Based on Psalm 77](#)

[Healing Insights](#)

[Mi Shebeirach](#)

[Nature Pursues its Own Course](#)

[On The Miracle of Recovery](#)

[Post Operative Prayer](#)

Mourning:

[Alone Together](#)

[Bitter-sweet: In the Memory of a Child](#)

[Comforting the Comforters](#)

[Consolation](#)

[Death and Free Choice](#)

[Eulogy For One Remembered](#)

[Fear of Death](#)

[For Those Beloved Who Survive Me](#)

[Graveside Reflections](#)

[Holding On and Letting Go](#)

[How To Mourn](#)

[It Is Never Too Late](#)

[Krieh - Tearing the Cloth](#)

[Life and Death](#)

[Returning From The Funeral](#)

[Sanctified Mourning](#)

[Sculpting Memory](#)

[Strange Envy](#)

[The Shiva Candle is Lit](#)

[Where is Grandma?](#)

[The Yahrzeit Glass](#)

Godliness and Immortality:

[Between](#)

[Elohim and Adonai: Genesis I & Genesis II](#)

[Elohim - Adonai](#)

[Who are they to me?](#)

[Godliness](#)
[Touch My Heart](#)

B. Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis Q & A (Questions 1-7):

[Shailos & Tsuvas: Questions and Answers](#)

C. Reading by Rabbi Edward Feinstein:

[Answering Our Children & Their Questions](#)

D. Prayers

[Mourners Kaddish](#)

E. Sermons

[The Uniqueness of Judaism](#) — by Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis

[Afterlife: What Happens After I Die](#) — by Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis

[Stories That Hurt, Stories That Heal](#) — by Rabbi Edward Feinstein

[Conversation with the Angel of Death](#) — by Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis

F. Tapes

(available for purchase at a nominal cost)

[Believing in God in the Face of Human Suffering](#) — by Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis (11/04/99)

NOTE: In addition, our archive of downloadable audio files of the rabbis' sermons and papers is continually growing. Please remember to check the index for new materials:
<http://www.schulweisinstitute.org/>

Part 6-Further Resources

A. Who To Call

To contact VBS:

If you're not sure who at VBS is the right person to contact, simply contact the VBS Reception Desk, and you'll be put in contact with someone who can help you:

VBS GENERAL CONTACT:

Email: info@vbs.org

Address: 15739 Ventura Boulevard
Encino, California 91436

Phone: (818) 788-6000

Fax: (818) 995-0526

(continued)

For direct calls to a particular VBS clergy or staff person, please use the following telephone numbers (or click on the direct email link where indicated).

VBS DIRECT CONTACT:

| | | |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------|
| Cemetery Property | Malcolm Katz | 818-530-4004 |
| Counseling | VBS Counseling Center | 818-784-1414 |
| Memorial & Simcha Plaques | Myra Miller | 818-530-4014 |
| Notification of Illness or Death | Janet Djalilmand | 818-530-4009 |
| Yahrzeit Notices | Myra Miller | 818-530-4014 |

| | | |
|-------|----------------------------------|--------------|
| Rabbi | Harold Schulweis | 818-788-6000 |
| Rabbi | Ed Feinstein | 818-530-4009 |
| Rabbi | Joshua Hoffman | 818-788-6000 |

B. Bereavement Support Group:

For the H.O.P.E. Unit Foundation meeting at VBS: [Bereavement Support](#)

C. Books and Websites

Many helpful books and websites are available on the topic of illness, death, mourning and condolence. Here are a few:

(NOTE: Clicking on a book title will take you to the Amazon.com page describing the book. Some of these books may also be borrowed from the VBS Library, telephone 818-530-4080, and other local libraries.)

Jewish Mourning And Condolence

- [Anne Brener, *Mourning & Mitzvah: A Guided Journal for Walking the Mourner's Path Through Grief to Healing*](#)
- [Anita Diamant, *Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead, and Mourn as a Jew*](#)
- [Ari Goldman, *Living a Year of Kaddish: A Memoir*](#)
- [Irving Greenberg, *Dignity Beyond Death: The Jewish Preparation for Burial*](#)
- [Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*](#)
- [Alfred J. Kolatch, *The Jewish Mourner's Book of Why*](#)
- [Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*](#)
- [Maurice Lamm, *Consolation: The Spiritual Journey Beyond Grief*](#)
- [Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*](#)
- [Nechama Liss-Levinson, *When a Grandparent Dies: A Kid's Own Remembering Workbook for Dealing With Shiva and the Year Beyond*](#)

- [Naomi Levy, *To Begin Again: The Journey Toward Comfort, Strength, and Faith in Difficult Times*](#)
- [Sherwin B. Nuland, *Jewish Insights on Death and Mourning*](#)
- [Kerry M. Olitzky, *Grief in Our Seasons: A Mourner's Kaddish Companion*](#)
- [David Techner, *A Candle for Grandpa: A Guide to the Jewish Funeral for Children and Parents*](#)
- [Leon Wieseltier, *Kaddish*](#)
- [Ron Wolfson, *A Time to Mourn, a Time to Comfort: A Guide to Jewish Bereavement*](#)

General Resources on Illness, Death, and Grieving

- [Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*](#)
- [Rachel Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*](#)

General Information on Estate Planning

Contact an estate planning attorney for advice concerning Wills, Trusts, Estate Planning, and Probate matters. For some general consumer background information, the State Bar of California offers the following consumer pamphlets at http://www.calbar.ca.gov/state/calbar/calbar_generic.jsp?cid=10581

- *Do I Need a Will?*
- *Do I Need Estate Planning?*
- *Do I Need a Living Trust?*

Ethical Wills

- [Jack Riemer and Nathaniel Stampfer, *So That Your Values Live On: Ethical Wills and How to Prepare Them*](#)
- [Israel Abrahams, *Hebrew Ethical Wills*](#)
- [Ron Lever, *An Ethical Will: Grandpa Teaches Values*](#)
- [Barry K. Baines, M.D., *Ethical Wills, Second Edition*](#)

Advance Directives (Durable Powers of Attorney; Living Wills)

- Caring Connections, National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (Excellent source for information and forms). <http://www.caringinfo.org/>
- American Academy of Family Physicians, *Advance Directives and Do Not Resuscitate Orders*. <http://www.familydoctor.org/003.xml>
- American Bar Association, *Consumer's Tool Kit for Health Care Advance Planning*. <http://www.abanet.org/aging/toolkit/home.html>
- Bet Tzedek, *Advance Directives For Health Care in California*. <http://www.bettzedek.org/advancedirectives.html>
- California Attorney General's Office, *Advance Health Care Directive*. http://www.ag.ca.gov/consumers/general/adv_hc_dir.htm
- California Healthcare Association, *Advance Health Care Directive*. <http://www.losrobleshospital.com/cpm/AdvanceDirective.pdf>

D. Hospital, Cemetery, Funeral, and Advance Need Arrangements

Jewish Patients in Hospitals

The Jewish Federation Council offers a brochure, *Resources for Jewish Patients in Los Angeles Hospitals*, available for free online downloading.

<http://www.jewishla.org/html/hospitalresources.htm>

VBS Cemetery Committee

The VBS Cemetery Committee offers counseling and assistance to VBS members in arranging for cemetery properties and funeral services. In particular, the Committee maintains an inventory of burial plots in the VBS sections at Eden Memorial Park, Mission Hills, and Mount Sinai Memorial Park, Simi Valley that are available for pre-need purchase by VBS members at very favorable prices and terms. For more information contact Malcolm Katz, VBS Executive Director, at 818-530-4004.

Los Angeles Area Jewish Cemeteries

The VBS Cemetery Committee maintains an inventory of burial plots in the VBS sections at the following cemeteries. For more information contact Malcolm Katz, VBS Executive Director, at 818-530-4004.

Eden Memorial Park
11500 Sepulveda Blvd.

Mission Hills, CA 91345
(818) 361-7161

Mount Sinai Memorial Park

6150 Mount Sinai Drive
Simi Valley, CA 93063
(800) 220-6776

<http://www.mt-sinai.com/>

Other near-by Los Angeles area Jewish cemeteries include:

Hillside Memorial Park

6001 Centinela Ave.
Los Angeles, CA 90045
(800) 576-1994

<http://www.hillsidememorial.com/>

Mount Sinai Memorial Park

5950 Forest Lawn Drive
Los Angeles, CA 90068
(800) 600-0076

<http://www.mt-sinai.com/>

For a complete list of active and historical Los Angeles area Jewish cemeteries, see
The Jewish Genealogical Society of Los Angeles list at
<http://www.jewishgen.org/jgsla/cemetery.htm>

Los Angeles Area Jewish Mortuaries and Funeral Directors

Groman Mortuaries

11500 Sepulveda Blvd.
Mission Hills, CA 91345
(818) 365-7151

Mount Sinai Mortuary Simi Valley

6150 Mount Sinai Dr
Simi Valley, CA 93063
(800) 600-0076

<http://www.mt-sinai.com/>

Mount Sinai Mortuary Hollywood Hills

5950 Forest Lawn Dr.
Los Angeles, CA 90068
(800) 600-0076

<http://www.mt-sinai.com/>

Hillside Mortuary

6001 W Centinela Ave.
Los Angeles, CA 90045
(800) 576-1994
<http://www.hillsidememorial.com/>

R.L. Malinow Glasband Weinstein Mortuaries

7700 Santa Monica Blvd.
West Hollywood, CA 90046
(800) 300-0223

Malinow and Silverman Mortuary

7366 S. Osage Ave.
Los Angeles, CA 90045
(800) 710-7100

Chevra Kadisha

7832 Santa Monica Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90046
(800) 654-6772

Sholom Memorial Park Mortuary

13017 N. Lopez Canyon Rd.
San Fernando, CA 91342
(818) 899-5211

Source: The Jewish Genealogical Society of Los Angeles

E. If Financial Assistance is Needed

Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles

Jewish Family Service of Los Angeles operates a Jewish Community Burial Program providing a traditional Jewish burial for those in financial need.

http://www.jfsla.org/index.php?/programs/details/program_jewish_community_burial_program/

Bet Tzedek Legal Clinic

Bet Tzedek offers various legal services to those in financial need, including its programs for Family Caregivers and Senior Legal services. You can contact its North Hollywood office. <http://www.bettzedek.org/index.html>

Part 7 – ADDITIONAL ARTICLES

A. How to Prepare a Eulogy, *by Rabbi Edward Feinstein*

At American funeral services, the eulogy, or memorial speech, is typically delivered by a clergyman—a rabbi, minister, priest, etc. This is not Jewish tradition. In Jewish tradition, it is the obligation of the community—the lay community—to celebrate the life of the deceased in words. Children and grandchildren, friends, neighbors bear the obligation to share memories of the deceased. This traditional practice is now returning to Jewish funerals.

What do you say? And how do you prepare a eulogy?

The purpose of a eulogy is to locate and specify what is immortal and lasting in a life. The body dies, but the person we love and respect hasn't died. The person still lives with us – in our memories, in our lives, in our values. The eulogy is a depiction of that which remains immortal after the death of the body.

Ask yourself:

- What did I learn from this life?
- What were this person's most cherished values?
- What brought this person their greatest joy?
- What moments did we share that reveal the character of the person?
- What was this person most proud of?
- What would he/she want to say to his/her children, grandchildren, and friends as a summary of the life?

Isolate two or three themes or values that most characterized the person. Describe these themes or values and add an anecdote, reminiscence, or an event that illustrates how they were part of the life. For example, *“Grandma loved family most of all. Her happiest times were holidays when we all gathered. Just last Passover....”*

There are many wonderful texts in the Jewish tradition that describe and celebrate our values. Use these texts to illustrate and celebrate the value of the deceased. If you need assistance locating a good text, ask your rabbi.

Sometimes, the easiest way to prepare a eulogy is write a letter to the deceased. In your letter, list the things you gained from this person's life: love, wisdom, kindness, etc.

What are you most grateful for in this life? For example: *“Dear Grandpa, I am grateful for the honesty and integrity you taught...”*

Remember a few things as you prepare:

- Prepare your eulogy talk in advance. Write it out. Do not depend upon your ability to speak extemporaneously. The emotions of a funeral are very strong, and you might find yourself standing in front of a crowd with a blank mind.
- Keep your talk brief. You cannot capture an entire life. So share what is most important in a few minutes. Any eulogy longer than ten minutes will lose the attention of an audience.
- Your goal is to help the gathering of friends and family to remember a life that has been lost. If there were moments of humor and joy in the life, by all means include them. There is nothing wrong with laughter at a funeral service. But remember that you are not there to entertain an audience. Getting laughs is not the goal.
- Describe important moments that you shared with the deceased. But remember that the eulogy is not about you. This is not your funeral, and not the time to elevate yourself.
- At times of loss, family and friends are vulnerable and sensitive. Read over your eulogy to be sure that nothing you say can be hurtful to a member of the family or a friend. Have someone else read over your eulogy to be sure nothing could be construed as hurtful.
- Not everything you say has to be in praise of the deceased. All of us have faults and darker sides to our character. If you are careful, you can share some of this in your eulogy. But do not say anything that comes from anger. If you are angry with the deceased, it is better not to say anything in public. There are times and places for sharing these feelings. Not at a funeral.

As you deliver your eulogy:

- You may find yourself getting choked up. This is to be expected. Just stop, take a breath, and continue.
- If you can't gather your emotions, then have someone else—another member of the family, or the rabbi—stand with you and read the remainder of your remarks.

B. How to Do an Unveiling Ceremony, by Rabbi Edward Feinstein

Introduction

It has long been a custom of the Jewish People to place a marker on a gravesite. The marker is made of some permanent material—stone or metal—and contains the name of the deceased. It may also contain the dates of birth and death, some very brief description of the deceased, or a phrase of prayer. This marker represents our conviction that the life of a person does not evaporate when the body dies. Some significant part of the person lives on among family, friends and community.

It has also become customary to gather some time after the death and burial to “unveil” and dedicate the marker. This ceremony is not formal tradition, but customary practice. Therefore it is not fully prescribed and is open to our own variations and inventions. A rabbi is not necessary at an unveiling. You can easily lead the ceremony yourself!

Many families wait until a year has passed before unveiling and dedicating the marker. Others do the ceremony after 11 months to signify the end of the daily recitation of *Kaddish*. Others do the ceremony after three or six months. Most families schedule the unveiling ceremony at a time when family and friends are available to gather at the gravesite. And most families follow the ceremony with a gathering of family and friends.

The Purpose of the Unveiling Ceremony

A year or so has passed since the death. The shock has worn off. The pain of loss is still very real, but it has changed. We have begun to learn to live without the regular presence of our loved one. We have begun to find our way back into life again.

The unveiling ceremony gathers us together at the gravesite to recall what is immortal and lasting in this life. We can talk about our loved one with a different spirit than the painful words of eulogy. We may talk of what we miss most in our loved one’s life. We may celebrate what was triumphant and unique in this life. We may laugh at their humor, feel the warmth of their love, bring close their wisdom, recall the moments we most cherish, and cry at the loss.

Preparing for the Ceremony

1. Ask members of the family and close friends to prepare a few words recalling your loved one. This is not eulogy, but a brief reflection on the person we miss.

- What one moment best reveals their character?
- What part of them will you never forget?
- In what did your loved one find greatest joy?
- What did you learn for this life?

2. Bring a bagful of stones to place on the gravesite. This is an old Jewish tradition showing that we have visited the gravesite to recollect the memory of our loved one. You can use either ordinary garden or driveway gravel, or decorative polished stones.

The Ceremony

1. Gather at the gravesite. Bring everyone gathered close together. The ceremony is brief; most people can stand through it. Begin with a few words of poetry or prayer to set the mood. We have come to a special place to recall what is eternal in our loved one's life. You will find some excellent poems and reflections on the VBS website. As well, you may look in a synagogue prayer book or the booklet of prayer provided by the memorial park.

2. Ask those gathered to share their words of memory of your loved one. Be patient. Not everyone speaks with fluency and grace. Let everyone who wishes share a reflection and a memory.

3. Ask one of the gathered to remove the cover and read the marker. If there are children present, this is a good job for them to feel involved and part of the ceremony.

4. Read the prayer *El Maley Rachameem* in Hebrew (if you are able) and English, and be sure to include the name of the deceased. You'll find this prayer in any prayer book and in the booklet provided by the memorial park.

5. Read the Mourners' *Kaddish* prayer together.

6. Distribute the stones and ask the gathered family and friends to place the stones on the grave marker.

C. The Art of Making a Shivah Call, by Dr. Ron Wolfson

We are not alone. This is the fundamental message of Judaism about death and bereavement. Every law and every custom of Jewish mourning and comforting has, at its core, the overwhelming motivation to surround those who are dying and those who will grieve with a supportive community. While some may argue that facing death and coping with grief heighten one's feeling of aloneness, the Jewish approach places loss and grief in the communal context of family and friends.

Comforters are obligated to tend to the needs of mourners. For instance, since a family sitting *shivah* should not prepare meals, it becomes the responsibility of the community to feed them. Some people send pre-prepared foods from local caterers, and many Jewish newspapers carry ads for "*shivah* trays." With our busy, frenetic lives, it is certainly convenient to turn to these sources. Yet, personally prepared and/or delivered food is a more traditional act of comfort. Liquor, candy or flowers are not usually sent. A donation to a charity designated by the mourners would be another appropriate way to honor the deceased, while comforting those who mourn.

As a comforter, making a *shivah* call is one of the most important acts of condolence. But, all too often, those visiting a mourner's home are not sure of the appropriate behavior. David Techner, funeral director at the Ira Kaufman Chapel in Detroit and a leading expert in the field, suggests that many people do not have the slightest idea as to why they even make the *shivah* call. "People need to ask themselves: 'What am I trying to do?' When people say things like, 'at least he's not suffering,' who are they trying to make comfortable? Certainly not the mourner. People say things like that so that they do not have to deal with the mourner's grief. The comment is for themselves, not the mourner."

In my interviews with rabbis, funeral directors, psychologists, and laypeople for *A Time to Mourn—A Time to Comfort* [Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs, 1993], I discovered that the act of comforting the mourner is quickly becoming a lost art. We do not know what to do, so many people avoid making a *shivah* call altogether. We do not know what to say, so many people say things that are more hurtful than helpful. We do not know how to act, so often the atmosphere is more festive than reflective.

The problem is exacerbated by mourners and their families who do not know how to set an appropriate tone. Many observances have become like parties, with plenty of food, drink and chitchat. Of course, there are alternatives. In some *shivah* homes, the *minyan* becomes the focus. During the service, the life of the deceased is remembered through stories and anecdotes.

Whichever type of *shivah* home you encounter, there are some basic guidelines for making a *shivah* call.

DECIDE WHEN TO VISIT. Listen for an announcement at the funeral service for the times that the mourners will be receiving guests. Usually the options are immediately after the funeral, around the *minyanim* in the evenings and mornings, or during the day. Should you wish to visit during another time, you may want to call ahead. Some experienced *shivah* visitors choose to visit toward the end of the week when it is frequently more difficult to gather a *minyan*.

DRESS APPROPRIATELY. Most people dress as if attending a synagogue service. Depending on the area of the country, more informal dress might be just as appropriate.

WASH YOUR HANDS. If you are visiting immediately after the funeral, you will likely see a pitcher of water, basin and towels near the door. It is traditional to wash your hands upon returning from the cemetery. This reflects the belief that contact with the dead renders a person "impure." There is no blessing to say for this act.

JUST WALK IN. Do not ring the doorbell. The front door of most *shivah* homes will be left open or unlocked since all are invited to comfort the mourners. This eliminates the need for the mourners to answer the door. On a practical level, it avoids the constant disruptive ringing of the bell.

TAKE FOOD TO THE KITCHEN. If you are bringing food, take it to the kitchen. Usually there will be someone there to receive it. Identify the food as meat, dairy or *pareve*. Be sure to put your name on a card or on the container so that the mourners will know you made the gift. It also helps to mark any pots or pans with your name if you want to retrieve them later.

FIND THE MOURNERS. Go to the mourners as soon as possible. What do you say? The tradition suggests being silent, allowing the mourner to open the conversation. Simply offering a hug, a kiss, a handshake, an arm around the shoulder speaks volumes. If you do want to open a conversation, start with a simple, "I'm so sorry," or "I don't know what to say. This must be really difficult for you," or "I was so sorry to hear about _____." Be sure to name the deceased. Why? Because one of the most powerful ways to comfort mourners is to encourage them to remember the deceased.

Recall something personal: "I loved _____. Remember the times we went on vacation together? She adored you so much." Do not tell people not to cry or that they will get over it. Crying is a normal part of the grieving process. And, as most people who have been bereaved will tell you, you never "get over" a loss, you only get used to it.

Spend anywhere from a few moments to ten minutes with the mourners. There will be others who also want to speak with them and you can always come back. If you are the only visitor, then, of course, spend as much time as you wish.

PARTICIPATE IN THE SERVICE. If a prayer service is conducted during your call, participate to the extent you can. If you do not know the service, sit or stand respectfully while it is in progress. If the rabbi or leader asks for stories about the deceased, do not hesitate to share one, even if it is somewhat humorous. The entire purpose of *shivah* is

to focus on the life of the person who has died and his or her relationship to the family and friends in that room.

IF INVITED, EAT. Take your cue from the mourners. In some homes, no food will be offered, nor should you expect to eat anything. In others, especially after the funeral, food may be offered. Be sure that the mourners have already eaten the meal of condolence before you approach the table. When attending a morning *minyan*, you will likely be invited to partake of a small breakfast. After evening *minyan*, coffee and cake may or may not be served. In any case, should you be invited to eat, be moderate in your consumption. Normally, guests are not expected to eat meals with the family during the *shivah*.

TALK TO YOUR FRIENDS. Inevitably, you will encounter other friends and acquaintances at a house of mourning. Your natural instinct will be to ask about them, to share the latest joke, to *shmooze* about sports or politics. You may be standing with a plate of food and a drink, and if you did not know better, it would feel like a party. But the purpose of the *shivah* is to comfort the mourners. You are in the home to be a member of the communal *minyan*. The appropriate topic of conversation is the deceased. Reminisce about his or her relationship to the mourners and to you. Of course, human nature being what it is, we tend to fall into our normal modes of social communication. This is not necessarily bad; however, you should be careful to avoid raucous humor, tasteless jokes, loud talk, and gossip.

DO NOT STAY TOO LONG. A *shivah* visit should be no more than an hour. If a service is held, come a few minutes before and stay a few after. Mourners uniformly report how exhausted they are by the *shivah* experience; do not overstay your welcome.

SAY GOOD-BYE. When you are ready to leave, you may want to wish the bereaved good health and strength, long life, and other blessings. The formal farewell to a mourner is the same Hebrew phrase offered at the gravesite and in the synagogue on Friday evening:

| | |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| May God comfort you | <i>HaMakom y'nachem etkhem</i> |
| among the other | <i>b'tokh sh'ar</i> |
| mourners | <i>a'vaylay</i> |
| of Zion and Jerusalem. | <i>Tzion v'Y'rushalayim</i> |

HaMakom is a name of God that literally means “the Place,” referring to God's omnipresent nature, including at the life-cycle events from birth to death. It is only God who can grant the mourner lasting comfort. The comforter comes to remind the mourners that the Divine powers of the universe will enable them to heal and go on with a meaningful life. Ultimate consolation comes only from the omnipresent God.

In another spelling, *B'tokh sha'ar* literally means “in the midst of the gate” and refers to the special gate for mourners within the walls of the Temple in Jerusalem. When you

entered the Temple Mount through that gate, you were literally *b'tokh sh'ar*, in the midst of the gate of mourners. Personal bereavement is thus seen in the total context of the community.

The great genius of Jewish bereavement is to empower the community to be God's partner in comforting those who mourn. In making a *shivah* call in an appropriate and traditional way, we are the medium through which God's comfort can be invoked. In learning the art of coping with dying, we are, in fact, learning an important aspect of the art of Jewish living.

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Part 8 - GLOSSARY

The following is a list of some of the Hebrew terms used in this Guide, with basic translations. To return to your previous place in the text, click on the “Back Button” (the “Previous View” green arrow button) in your Acrobat Reader screen.

| <u>TERM</u> | <u>DEFINITION</u> |
|-----------------------------|---|
| <i>Ashkenazi</i> | Jews who originated from Europe (Ashkenaz=Germany). By and large they spoke Yiddish and shared similar customs and practices. |
| <i>Bikur Holim</i> | The mitzvah of visiting and comforting the sick, including strangers. |
| <i>Chevra Kadisha</i> | |
| <i>Havurah</i> | A Havurah is a small group composed of members of VBS who join together in each other's homes to celebrate their existence as Jews. VBS currently has over 50 functioning Havurot. If you'd like more information about joining a Havurah, please go to http://www.vbs.org/organizations/havura.htm |
| <i>Kaddish</i> | Traditional prayer in memory of the dead said at funerals and during Shivah by close relatives. Mourners also recite Kaddish during services throughout the formal mourning period, on the Yahrzeit anniversary of the death, and during holiday Yizkor services. Kaddish requires a minyan. |
| <i>Keriah</i> | The practice of mourners making a small tear in their clothing to symbolize their grief. Today this is commonly done at the funeral on a black ribbon worn by the mourners. |
| <i>Kohen, pl. Kohenim</i> | Any man who can trace his family roots to the Temple priesthood—most people called Cohen or any variant of that name but can have other names. They are given the honor of the first Aliyah and if highly observant may avoid ordinary contact with dead bodies and cemeteries. |
| <i>Minyan</i> | The minimal number of ten Jews required for any communal religious service. In most Conservative and Reform synagogues today, women are counted for the Minyan. |
| <i>Mitzvah, pl. Mitzvot</i> | Technically, a commandment from the Torah, but also commonly used to refer to any good deed. |

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| <i>Onen</i> | The initial status of a family member from the time of the death until the funeral. In recognition of both the practical necessity to make funeral arrangements and the psychological circumstances prior to the burial, neither the Onen nor the community is to engage in mourning or condolence rites during this period, and the Onen is excused from normal ritual obligations. |
| Pararabbinics | Lay members of VBS who have been specially trained to assist the Rabbis in helping congregants regarding ritual matters and life-cycle events |
| <i>Sephardi</i> | Jews who came from Spain (Sepharad), North Africa and the Mediterranean. They spoke Ladino and had local customs and practices. Religiously there are only minor differences from the western Ashkenazi practice. |
| <i>Shabbat</i> | (Hebrew: Sabbath, from the number seven) Jewish Shabbat observances and restrictions on some activities apply each week from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday. Because of the importance of observing Shabbat, funerals and home Shivah services are not held on Shabbat. |
| <i>Shalom</i> | (Hebrew: "Peace", or wholeness) Since this word for peace was traditionally used in the Middle East in phrases for greeting and farewell, it is now used to say "Hello" and "Goodbye". |
| <i>Sheloshim</i> | (Hebrew: "Thirty") The thirty-day period marking the second period of Jewish mourning practices, less intense than the Shivah period, aimed at gradually returning the mourners to regular society. |
| <i>Shivah</i> | Traditional Jewish mourning occurs over a succession of fixed periods, each with its particular rituals and level of intensity. The Shivah (from the Hebrew word for "seven") is the approximately seven-day period following the funeral that marks the most intense period of formal mourning for the family and the supporting community. |
| <i>Talit (Tallis)</i> | The prayer shawl with its prescribed fringes (Tzitzit) used in daily prayer. The fringes are a reminder of the Mitzvot. |
| <i>Talmud</i> | The compilation of early rabbinic interpretation and commentary on Jewish law, custom, and thought, considered to be the authoritative Oral Torah complementing the written Torah. |
| <i>Tzitzit</i> | The four knotted fringes at the corners of the Talit. The knots are tied in a manner to signify 613, the number of the Mitzvot |

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| | commanded in the Torah. |
| Unveiling | A ceremony to dedicate the headstone or grave marker. Typically attended only by the family, the unveiling is often scheduled close to the first anniversary of the death. Some ideas for structuring the ceremony appear in Rabbi Feinstein's article on "How to Do an Unveiling Ceremony" . |
| <i>Yahrzeit</i> | A Yiddish word for anniversary of the death of a family member. It calls for the recitation of the Kaddish in a Minyan. |
| <i>Yizkor</i> | A Hebrew word for remembrance. A synagogue service for all the community to remember their dead. It is recited on Yom Kippur and the pilgrimage festivals of Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot. |