

**BRISBANE PROGRESSIVE JEWISH CONGREGATION INCORPORATED**

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# *A Mourner's Companion*

## **A Summary of Jewish Practices in Death and Mourning**

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# A Summary of Jewish Practices in Death and Mourning

"Teach us to treasure each day..." (Psalm 90)

Jewish tradition is wise in its understanding of human needs at the time of death. Customs and practices surrounding death and bereavement are a gift from the past to help guide us during a time when we may feel we have lost our bearings. The central values expressed by our tradition are:

- *Kevod ha-met*—Respect for the body of the deceased as the vessel which housed the soul in life.
- *Nichum avelim*—Comforting the bereaved.

## **Aninut**

The first phase of the mourning process is called *aninut*. An immediate relative of the deceased who is going through *aninut* is called an *onen (m) / onenet (f)*. During *aninut*, which lasts from the time one learns of the death until the burial takes place, tradition recognizes the inner turmoil of immediate relatives. They are not expected to participate in social engagements or go to work. They must be free to focus upon the need to make immediate decisions regarding the deceased. Judaism recognizes as primary mourners those who have lost a parent, spouse, sibling, or child.

## **First decisions**

When a death has occurred, the focus moves quickly to funeral arrangements. Many decisions must be made in a short period of time. You will need to notify family and friends, write or contribute to an obituary (if required), schedule a time for the funeral, decide who will deliver the eulogy, and choose pallbearers. You are not alone during this time.

Do not hesitate to ask Brisbane Progressive Jewish Congregation, our Minister, or your wider family members and friends for help with these decisions. Neighbours, members of the Jewish community and friends will also want to help with other tasks. Take them up on offers to provide meals, child-care, or rides.

Important contact numbers are:

- Secretary, Brisbane Progressive Jewish Congregation – 0419 267 529
- Brisbane *Chevra Kadisha* – 0411 256 446 or 0412 192 129
- Cannon and Cripps Funeral Home – 07 3356 4277 or 04 1874 0432

## **Autopsy and organ donation**

*P'kuach nefesh*, saving a life, is one of Judaism's highest values. Although the principle of *kevod ha-met* has traditionally regarded autopsy as a desecration of the body, it is permitted if the knowledge gained may help to save the life of another. It is also permitted if the Coroner deems it necessary to rule out human intervention that might have unlawfully hastened death. Organ donation is very much in keeping with the principle of *p'kuach nefesh*. Traditional burial practices are still possible following autopsy and organ donation. The physicians involved should be informed of the family's intention to follow Jewish traditions so that the body will be disturbed only to the extent necessary.

## **Shmira**

*Kevod ha-met* is traditionally observed by the practice of *shmira* (literally, "guarding"). The body is not left alone between the time of death and the time of burial. This respectful tradition involves sitting quietly with the deceased in the funeral home and reading Psalms or meditating. (The body is not on view.) On request, Cannon and Cripps and Brisbane Chevra Kadisha may be able to assist in providing limited access for any *shomrim* who have been arranged.

## **Tahara**

The *tahara*, ritual purification, performed by members of the Brisbane Chevra Kadisha, is a beautiful tradition of preparing the body for burial in a dignified and respectful manner. *Tahara* consists of three parts. First, the *met* (*m*) / *metah* (*f*) is gently bathed (*rechitsa*). Next, the actual ritual purification (*tahara*) is performed by pouring a continuous stream of water over the *met*. Finally, the deceased is dried and dressed (*halbashah*) in simple white shrouds (*tachrichim*).

If the deceased wore a *tallit* or *kittel* in life, these may be included as part of the *tachrichim*. The *met* is placed in the coffin, and a bit of earth from the land of Israel is sprinkled over the wrapped body. Each action is accompanied by appropriate prayers and biblical readings. Throughout the process care is taken to handle the *met* gently, lovingly, and with respect for modesty. Only women are involved in the preparation of women; men prepare men, although women may assist with the preparation of a man if not enough men are available.

## **The coffin**

Tradition decrees that rich and poor alike should be buried as simply as possible, dressed in unadorned white shrouds in a plain wood coffin (*aron*) without a lining. This dates back to the time of Rabbi Simeon ben Gamliel II, in the second century C.E. Elaborate coffins are seen as unnecessary expense and undue ostentation. In death we are all equal.

## **Kria**

Death rends the fabric of life. We symbolize this by rending a garment before the funeral. Some people actually tear a piece of clothing; others tear a black ribbon attached to their garment. The tradition is to tear on the left (close to the heart) for a parent or child, and on the right for spouses and siblings. The tradition of *kria* dates to biblical times. After we tear we recite the blessing, "*Baruch atah Adonai Eloheynu melech ha-olam, dayan ha-emet*" (Praised are you, Eternal our God, the true Judge). This is the same prayer which is said upon hearing of (or witnessing) a death. The rent garment or ribbon is worn throughout the period of *shiva*.

## **The funeral**

The time of the funeral service should be agreed upon with the Cantor or other funeral officiator. If the Cantor is not available, BPJC can provide experienced lay leaders to lead the service.

A Jewish funeral is not elaborate. It includes the recitation and / or chanting of appropriate readings and psalms, a eulogy (*hesped*) which celebrates the life of the deceased, and closing prayers including the chanting of *El malei rachamim* (God filled with compassion...). There are no flowers or music (these are associated with joyous occasions). The casket is

closed. If well-meaning friends unfamiliar with our tradition send flowers, do thank them for their kind intention. You may wish to display the flowers at home so that the donor who visits may see them and know his/her gesture was recognized and appreciated, or you may give them to someone not in mourning.

The funeral may include a service in the funeral home followed by a brief graveside service, or a graveside service only. These decisions should be discussed with the Cantor or other funeral officiator.

## **Burial**

Burial in the Brisbane Jewish community takes place in either the Jewish (Orthodox and Progressive) monumental section or the Progressive Jewish lawn section at Mt Gravatt Cemetery. (Please note these two sections are in separate locations.) The funeral home will arrange for the opening of the relevant gravesite. Approval to bury in the Jewish monumental section of the cemetery is given on terms and conditions set by Brisbane *Chevra Kadisha*. Approval to bury in the Progressive Jewish lawn section is given by the relevant Progressive Jewish Congregation, in conjunction with Brisbane City Council.

Jewish tradition supports burial as soon as feasible following death. Traditionally, this took place within 24 hours; however, it is not uncommon for a longer period of time to pass in order to allow relatives to travel from a distance to attend the funeral. Burial should occur before *Shabbat* if at all possible; Jewish burials do not take place on *Shabbat* or Jewish holidays.

Traditionally, Jews return the body to the earth in its natural state and do not embalm or cremate, in keeping with Genesis 3:19, "For you are dust and to dust you shall return." In ancient times embalming was an Egyptian practice. In modern times it is a common Christian practice. Embalming is not required by law except in some cases when the body is to be shipped over a long distance. Some communities support the idea of cremation, which, while not a traditional Jewish practice, is accepted by many contemporary rabbis. Those intending an alternative to a burial should discuss this with Brisbane Progressive Jewish Congregation as soon as the intention is clear.

Following the principle of *kevod ha-met* there is no viewing of the body and no "visitation" at the funeral home preceding the funeral, because we remember our loved ones as they were. Instead, friends visit the home of the mourners following the burial, during the period of *shiva*.

The graveside service is brief. After the coffin is lowered into the ground, those in attendance, including the immediate mourners, participate in the burial of their loved one. Using a provided shovel or their hands, attendees gently place three shovelfuls of earth into the grave.

In Jewish tradition we are commanded to accompany those who have died to their final resting place. Since those who have passed away are incapable of fulfilling this mitzvah, we take responsibility upon ourselves to participate in their burial, just as, some day in the future; other people will tend to this mitzvah on our behalf. Once the grave is filled, *Kaddish* (a traditional prayer in Aramaic) is recited.

## **Shiva**

Jewish traditions offer very specific recommendations for gradual re-entry into normal life. In the first week after the funeral, mourners are treated with the utmost care and respect. Their needs are met by the community. Mourners return home immediately after the funeral and are greeted by a "meal of consolation" prepared by friends, extended family, and community.

Round foods (e.g. boiled eggs, bagels, lentils) are often included to symbolize the wholeness of life. It is traditional to place a pitcher of water, bowl, and towels outside the door of the house for ritual hand washing, and to light a large *shiva* candle, also known as a *ner daluk*, or burning light, and keep it burning for seven days and seven nights as a symbol of the divine spark that inhabits the body.

The *shiva* period is traditionally seven days in length, counting the day of the funeral. This period of intense mourning ends on the morning of the seventh day. During *shiva* mourners do not go to work; they attend to the work of mourning. BPJC will generally organise a *minyán* at the *shiva* home on the evening of the funeral so that the primary mourners can say *Kaddish* if the family so desires.

On *Shabbat* mourners leave their home and attend a service so they can say *Kaddish* with the *minyán* there. Judaism requires the bereaved to celebrate *Shabbat*, in keeping with the belief that life takes precedence over death. Some families may choose a shorter observance of *shiva*, such as three days, or the days remaining between the funeral and the next *Shabbat*.

The *shiva* period gives mourners time to withdraw from the world and begin to integrate their loss. Our tradition emphasizes a focus on remembering and the emotional inner work of mourning. Thus, the mourner need not bathe, change clothing, shave or use makeup. Mirrors are covered. These practices may be modified according to individual needs, but their aim of keeping the focus on the spiritual and emotional aspects of loss should remain.

The phrase “sitting *shiva*” refers to the practice of sitting on a low seat or on the floor to symbolize being struck down by grief. Mourners do not attend purely social functions during this period. It is customary to end the *shiva* period with a walk outside, symbolizing a beginning of returning to the world.

## **Shloshim**

Some people observe a further mourning period known as *shloshim*. This is a period of 30 days, counting from the day of the funeral. During this time primary mourners continue to say *Kaddish* for the deceased. After this, only children continue to say *Kaddish* for a parent for a period of eleven months (less one day). During the *shloshim* mourners return to work but are still not completely back in the world. This is expressed by avoiding parties, concerts and other forms of public entertainment.

Following the principle that life always takes precedence over death, they may attend a wedding or *bar/bat mitzvah*, but not the reception. In modern practice people make their own decisions about which forms of mourning to observe and for how long. No one can prescribe the length of time it takes to integrate a loss. Psychologically it is wise to recognize that mourning may continue for an extended period of time and permit oneself to take those courses of action which provide comfort.

## **The grave marker**

The grave stone or lawn plaque can be selected shortly after the funeral, but the “consecration” or placement of the marker is usually held after the eleven months and a day of mourning are completed. The text on the stone<sup>1</sup> or plaque usually includes the full name in Hebrew and English and the English and Hebrew dates of birth and death. The consecration is the first opportunity to observe the *mitzvah* of visiting the grave after the placement of the monument.

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<sup>1</sup> The grave stone must conform to the specifications set out in the By Laws of the Brisbane Chevra Kadisha.

The consecration service is a relatively recent practice. The Cantor need not be present, but families may wish to invite the Cantor to officiate. The ceremony is brief, with a few psalms and readings, a few words about the deceased, the recitation of *El malei rachamim* and, if a *minyán* is present, the mourner's *Kaddish*.

## **Yahrzeit**

The anniversary of the death of a loved one is called *yahrzeit*, Yiddish for “year’s time.” This anniversary is observed according to the date of death on the Hebrew calendar. It is traditional to light a special *yahrzeit* candle which burns for 24 hours to mark this anniversary. Since Jewish days begin at sunset the candle is lit on the evening before the day of death. There is no blessing for lighting a *yahrzeit* candle.

Other may simply meditate on the life of the deceased and pray privately or choose to read Psalms or other inspirational readings. Some people use the day to participate in an activity which reflects the values of the deceased.

## **Yizkor**

*Yizkor* (memorial) services are held on the three pilgrimage festivals (the last days of *Sukkot* and *Pesach* and on *Shavuot*) and on *Yom Kippur*. The *Yizkor* prayer recalls and names those who have died, along with others in our community and throughout Jewish history. *Yizkor* was originally instituted as a regular practice after the first crusade in 1096 C.E. when entire communities of Jews chose death over forced baptism. The surviving communities instituted the service as a memorial to the pious martyrs. There is a custom of giving charity (*tzedakah*) in the name of the deceased not only on the anniversary of the death, but each time we recite *Yizkor*.

## **Tzedakah**

There is a close connection between *tzedakah* (“righteous giving”) and Jewish mourning customs. *Tzedakah* is a way to make memory tangible. Giving money to, or working for, causes and organizations that were important to the deceased creates a living memorial which keeps their beliefs alive and active. Through *tzedakah* we connect the living with the dead in the work of *tikkun olam*, “repairing the world.” Our tradition warns against excessive mourning. Helping to repair the world is a way to translate grief into healing and justice, *tzedek*.

## **Further reading**

- ✧ *A Brief Guide to Death and Bereavement*, Rabbi Fred Morgan, Temple Beth Israel, St Kilda - [http://www.jewishfunerals.org.au/planning\\_ahead.php?type=bereavement#Jewish%20Festivals](http://www.jewishfunerals.org.au/planning_ahead.php?type=bereavement#Jewish%20Festivals)
- ✧ *A Time to Mourn, a Time to Comfort*, Ron Wolfson, Jewish Lights Publishing, jewishlights.com.
- ✧ *Death and Bereavement: A Halakhic Guide*, Abner Weiss, Mesorah Publications, Limited, 2001.
- ✧ *Jewish Insights on Death and Mourning*, Sherwin B. Nuland and Jack Riemer (eds.), Syracuse University Press, 2002.
- ✧ *Saying Kaddish*, Anita Diamant, Shoken Books, 1998.
- ✧ *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, Maurice Lamm, Jonathan David Publishers, 1969.

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**Memorial Prayer**  
***El malei rachamim***

אל מלא רחמים שוכן במרומים.  
המצא מנוחה נכונה תחת כנפיו  
השכינה עם קדושים וטהורים כזוהר  
הרקיע מזהירים את נשמת \_\_\_\_\_  
בן/בת \_\_\_\_\_ שהלך/כה לעולמו/מה.  
בעל הרחמים יסתיר/הוה  
בסתר כנפיו לעולמים.  
ויצרו בצרור החיים את נשמתו/תה.  
וי הוא נחלתו/תה.  
וינוח/תנוח בשלום על משכבו/בה.  
ונאמר אמן:

*El malei rachamim, shochayn  
bam'romim, ham'tzay m'nucha n'chona  
tachat kan'fay  
Hash'china, im k'doshim ut'horim  
k'zohar haraki'a maz'hirim et nish'mat  
(Name of the Deceased)  
shehalach(m)/cha(f) l'olamo/ma.  
Ba'al Harachamim yas'tirayhu/ha  
b'sayter k'nafav l'olamim.  
V'yitz'ror bitz'ror hachayim et  
nish'mato/ta,  
Adonay Hu nachalato/ta.  
V'yanuach/tanuach b'shalom al  
mish'kavo/va.  
V'nomar: Amein.*

m

n.

God full of compassion, Eternal Spirit of the universe,  
grant perfect rest under the wings of Your Presence  
to \_\_\_\_\_ who has entered eternity.  
Master of Mercy, let him/her find refuge forever  
in the shadow of Your wings, and let his/her soul be bound up  
in the bond of eternal life.  
The Eternal God is his/her inheritance.  
May he/she rest in peace, and let us say: Amen.

יִתְגַּדַּל וְיִתְקַדַּשׁ שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא בְּעֵלְמָא דִּי־בְרָא כְרַעוּתָהּ,

Yit-ga-dal ve-yit-ka-dash she-mei ra-ba be-al-ma di-ve-ra chi-re-u-tei,

וְיִמְלִיךְ מַלְכוּתָהּ בְּחַיֵּינוּ וּבְיוֹמֵינוּ וּבְכָל־בֵּית

ve-yam-lich mal-chu-tei be-cha-yei-chon u-ve-yo-mei-chon u-ve-cha-yei  
de-chol beit

יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּעֵגְלָא וּבְזִמְן קָרִיב, וְאָמְרוּ: אָמֵן.

Yis-ra-eil, ba-a-ga-la u-vi-ze-man ka-riv, ve-i-me-ru: a-mein.

יְהֵא שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא מְבָרַךְ לְעָלְמָא וְלְעָלְמֵי עָלְמַיָּא.

Ye-hei she-mei ra-ba me-va-rach le-a-lam u-le-al-mei al-ma-ya.

יְתַבְרַךְ וְיִשְׁתַּבַּח, וְיִתְפָּאֵר וְיִתְרוֹמַם וְיִתְנַשֵּׂא, וְיִתְהַדָּר

Yit-ba-rach ve-yish-ta-bach, ve-yit-pa-ar ve-yit-ro-mam ve-yit-na-sei, ve-yit-ha-dar

וְיִתְעַלֶּה וְיִתְהַלַּל שְׁמֵהּ דְּקוּדְשָׁא, בְּרִיךְ הוּא, לְעֵלְא מְרַכְּל-

ve-yit-a-leh ve-yit-ha-lal she-mei de-ku-de-sha, be-rich hu, le-ei-la min kol

בְּרַכְתָּא וְשִׁירְתָּא, תְּשַׁבְּחָתָא וְנִחְמָתָא דְּאִמְרֵן בְּעֵלְמָא,

bi-re-cha-ta ve-shi-ra-ta, tush-be-cha-ta ve-ne-che-ma-ta, da-a-mi-ran be-al-ma,

וְאָמְרוּ: אָמֵן.

ve-i-me-ru: a-mein.

יְהֵא שְׁלָמָא רַבָּא מְרַשְׁמַיָּא וְחַיִּים עָלֵינוּ וְעַל־כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל,

Ye-hei she-la-ma ra-ba min she-ma-ya ve-cha-yim a-lei-nu ve-al kol Yis-ra-eil,

וְאָמְרוּ: אָמֵן.

ve-i-me-ru: a-mein.

עֲשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמְרוֹמָיו, הוּא יַעֲשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם עָלֵינוּ וְעַל־כָּל־

O-seh sha-lom bi-me-ro-mav, hu ya-a-seh sha-lom a-lei-nu ve-al kol

יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאָמְרוּ: אָמֵן.

Yis-ra-eil, ve-i-me-ru: a-mein.

Let God's name be made great and holy in the world that was created as God willed. May God complete the holy realm in our own lifetime, in our days, and in the days of all the house of Israel, quickly and soon.

And let us say: Amen.

May God's great name be praised, forever and as long as worlds endure. May it be blessed, and praised, and glorified, and held in honour, viewed with awe, embellished, and revered; and may the blessed name of holiness be hailed, though it be higher by far than all the blessings, songs, praises, and consolations that we utter in this world.

And let us say: Amen.

May God grant abundant peace, and life to us, and to all Israel. And let us say: Amen.

May the One who creates harmony in the universe, grant peace to us and to all Israel. And let us say: Amen.