

## **A Guide For Mourners** **Beth El Synagogue Center**

This document is for anyone mourning the death of a loved one. The period of time following a loss is full of logistics. This resource provides a basic outline of the rituals that Jewish law and tradition have developed for those who are grieving. We also included suggestions for more in-depth reading.

### **Who Are Mourners?**

A mourner (*aveil* in Hebrew) is a specific category in Jewish law. While we can and do experience grief over the death of friends and relatives, Jewish rules of mourning (*aveilut*) apply to those who are mourning the seven immediate family relationships: a parent, sibling, child, or spouse.

### ***Aninut***

The period of grieving that follows death but precedes burial is called *aninut*. During this period, family members of the deceased focus primarily on making all of the appropriate arrangements preparing for burial. These arrangements are our way of showing honor for the dead (*Kavod HaMet*), which is such an important part of Jewish law that the rabbis exempt mourners from participating in many positive time-bound commandments (e.g. praying in a *minyan*, putting on *tefillin*, or lighting Shabbat candles). Other ways of honoring the dead include: ritually washing the body (*taharah*), remaining with the body until burial (*shmirah*), and wrapping the body in special shrouds known as *tachrichin*. The funeral home will help you arrange these.

### ***Shiva***

*Shiva* refers to the seven-day mourning period that begins immediately following the burial. The first week of mourning is observed by parents, siblings, children, and spouses of the person who has died. After the first day (the day of the burial), *shiva* is observed for six more days and ends on the morning of the seventh day. The time between the death and burial is typically focused on preparing for the funeral (*Kavod HaMet* in Hebrew). *Shiva*, on the other hand, gives the family a chance to share memories and be comforted by loved ones, friends, and community. It creates space for grieving by pausing or slowing down other parts of daily life.

### ***Shiva Customs***

Typically, *shiva* observance takes place in the home of the person who died or the home of a mourner. Because of COVID, some have observed *shiva* by attending Beth El's

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minyan and receiving visitors in one of Beth El's ballrooms. If you are interested in sitting shiva at Beth El, please indicate that to the clergy team or by notifying the front office at 914-235-2700.

Shiva begins immediately after the funeral with a *seudat havra'ah* (meal of consolation), often prepared by friends, family, or community members, but not the mourners themselves. It is customary to serve mourners food throughout the week as a way of caring for them in this period of intensified grief.

There is a custom for mourners to remain at home throughout the week of shiva and sit low to the ground. Beth El can provide you with special shiva chairs. Please contact the front office for more information: 914-235-2700.

Traditionally, mourners wear non-leather shoes and refrain from daily routines like bathing, changing clothes, shaving, and wearing makeup. It is customary to wear the piece of clothing or ribbon that was torn during k'riah before the funeral throughout shiva. Mirrors are covered so that mourners can focus on their grief and find comfort in the embrace of friends and family instead of being distracted by their appearance.

Another element of preparing a home for shiva is lighting a shiva candle after returning from the burial. The book of Proverbs says, "A person's soul is the lamp of the Eternal One" (Prov. 20:27) and therefore we light a candle for the seven-day period of shiva as a way of centering our loved one's memory in our homes. This candle is typically provided by the funeral home.

It is a *mitzvah* to visit a shiva house and bring food, but it is not meant to be a social visit. Those making a shiva call should allow the mourner to set the tone. It is customary to wait for the mourner to initiate conversation after a visitor has expressed their condolences.

There is a custom of giving tzedakah to an organization that is meaningful to the mourner or the person who died.

The end of shiva is marked by a walk around the block on the morning of the seventh day. At this point, work and other daily activities may resume.

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### **Shabbat during *Shiva***

Many of the external markers and customs of shiva are paused for Shabbat, beginning at sundown Friday and ending after *havdalah* on Saturday night (about one hour after sunset). Mourners are encouraged to come to services at Beth El over Shabbat to say Kaddish with the community, rather than saying Kaddish at home. There is a custom for mourners to enter Kabbalat Shabbat after the recitation of *Lecha Dodi*, at which point the community will welcome them with traditional words of comfort.

### **Mourner's Kaddish**

Mourners begin reciting Kaddish at the cemetery.

It is traditional to recite Kaddish at each of the three daily services: morning (*Shacharit*), afternoon (*Mincha*), and evening (*Ma'ariv*). When sitting shiva in one's home, it is customary to hold these services at home, which Beth El can help arrange. This includes finding people to help make a minyan, providing *siddurim* (prayer books), and lending a Torah when necessary. Beth El's *minyan* is also an option Sunday through Friday, both in person and over Zoom. On Shabbat, the virtual option is a livestream view of our sanctuary.

After shiva, while some of the rituals of mourning end, many rituals continue for the next 23 days, culminating in *shloshim* (thirty in Hebrew), which marks the thirty days from burial (inclusive of shiva) when mourners continue saying Kaddish thrice daily for their loved one. In the case of a child mourning a parent, the daily recitation of Kaddish continues for eleven months less a day from the date of burial.

During shloshim, people may resume their typical daily activities and work, but still refrain from attending celebrations, listening to music, shaving/cutting one's hair, or buying new clothes. Some of these restrictions continue for those mourning a parent for the eleven months of reciting Kaddish.

### **Learning in memory of a loved one**

The word for soul in Hebrew is *Neshamah*. When these letters are rearranged they form the word Mishnah (an early rabbinic code of law). Therefore, there is a very old custom (pre-dating kaddish by 1000 years) to learn Mishnah in the memory of a loved one. For more information about learning Mishnah please contact someone on the clergy team and they will help guide you through that process.

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### ***Yizkor***

There is a custom that some people do not recite *Yizkor* for a loved one until one year has passed since their death. The reason for this is that their grief may be so raw that they will wail during the service such that it distracts others. If one feels that they can recite *Yizkor* without distracting others, they are encouraged to do so during the first year of mourning. This is the prevalent custom in our community.

### **Unveiling**

There are several customs connected to the timing for an unveiling of the graveside monument/plaque. Most people hold an unveiling ceremony either at the end of the eleven month period of mourning or on a date that is close to the first *yahrzeit*. Some have the custom of holding an unveiling ceremony after *shloshim*, but this is often not possible due to the time it takes to prepare and arrange for a footstone or headstone.

### ***Yahrzeit***

While each period of mourning is counted from the day of burial, the *yahrzeit* is observed yearly on the date of a loved one's death. It is customary to say Kaddish, light a candle, fast, visit the grave, and donate money to charity as a way of observing the *yahrzeit* of a loved one. The *yahrzeit* is marked on the Hebrew date of death beginning with the evening service (*Ma'ariv*) and concluding with the afternoon service (*Mincha*) on the following day.

### **Additional Resources**

The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning by Rabbi Maurice Lamm, Jonathan David, New York 1969

Consolation, The Spiritual Journey Beyond Grief by Rabbi Maurice Lamm, The Jewish Publication Society, New York 2004

Mourning and Mitzvah: A Guided Journal for Walking the Mourner's Path Through Grief to Healing by Anne Brener, Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont 1993

The Jewish Mourner's Book of Why by Arthur Kolatch, Jonathan David, New York 1993

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<https://www.shiva.com/>

Beth El's clergy are always available to answer questions or offer support as you navigate this period of mourning. You can reach us at 914-235-2700 or by emailing [clergy@bethelnr.org](mailto:clergy@bethelnr.org)