

Guide to Beth Israel Funeral Practices and Customs

Introduction

Jewish tradition provides a rich variety of rituals and practices that honor the dead and allow mourners to adjust to the loss of a loved one. An important role of the Beth Israel community is to assist members during these difficult life transitions, providing spiritual and emotional support.

These guidelines provide you with contact information, listing those people who are able to support you during this difficult time, as well as a brief description of traditional and contemporary Jewish ritual practices.

In the event of a death, please take the following steps:

- Immediately contact Rabbi Vinikoor to notify her of the death. Issues she will help you with include selecting a funeral home and help determining time and place of the funeral. Rabbi Vinikoor will also arrange an in-person meeting with her and close family members of the deceased prior to the funeral to discuss the funeral service as well as Shiva and other mourning rituals described below.

Phone: (207) 443-4606
Email: rabbivinikoor@gmail.com

- Contact a funeral home to arrange for care of the deceased prior to burial. The Jewish Funeral Home in Portland has assisted many of our families with support during this time. Daigle Funeral Homes in Bath also has experience with Jewish funerals. There are other local funeral homes. Feel free to contact any of them if you prefer.

The Jewish Funeral Home
471 Deering Ave. Portland, Maine, 04103
Phone: (207) 774-3733
Fax: (207) 774-3735
Email: rabbi@portlandjewishfuneralhome.org
Website: portlandjewishfuneralhome.org

Daigle Funeral Home
819 High Street, Bath, Maine 04530
Phone: (207) 443-3061
Fax: (207) 443-3183
Email: jayne-dfh@comcast.net
Website: daiglefuneralhome.com

- If you have not already purchased a plot at Beth Israel's cemetery contact Stan Lane
Email: cemetery@bethisraelbath.org

The price per burial space for members of Beth Israel, including a donation to the cemetery Chevra Kadisha Fund, is \$1,000. This pays for the right to be buried in the cemetery and to have perpetual care of the burial space performed by the City of Bath Department of Parks and Cemeteries. Non-Members can purchase a plot at a higher fee.

The Synagogue controls and distributes the burial rights for the burial spaces located in the Jewish Cemetery even though the actual ownership of the land occupied by the Jewish Cemetery remains part of the Bath Municipal Cemetery and is owned by the City of Bath. Burial costs, which are not included in this price, are set by the Director of the City of Bath Department of Parks and Cemeteries and will be due at the time of a funeral.

Overview of Traditional Jewish Burial and Mourning Practices

- *From Death to the Funeral*

In Jewish tradition, From the death until the burial is the period known as Aninut. For the mourners their only obligation is to make arrangements for the funeral. Tradition recognizes the harried, confusing, shocking nature of this initial stage of grief by relieving mourners of all other regular responsibilities.

- *Funeral Service and Burial*

The Service may be held in the synagogue, at the chapel of the funeral home, or at the graveside. In keeping with the idea that all are equal in death, the various elements of this ritual are usually quite simple. Graveside services are recommended for smaller groups, in predictably good weather. Usually, the funeral service is held at the synagogue or funeral home, followed by a funeral procession from there to the cemetery.

- *The Service*

Before the Service, mourners participate in the custom of k'riah, the tearing of garments. In this ancient ritual, the officiant tears an item of clothing or a black ribbon, symbolizing death rending the fabric of life. The mourners stand together signifying strength, and recite a prayer acknowledging the inevitability of death. With the exception of Shabbat, the ribbon may be worn for the next 30 days.

During the funeral service, the immediate family usually sits in the front row of the chapel, sanctuary or graveside. The traditional service includes the chanting of psalms, a eulogy honoring the deceased, and El Malei Rachamim (the traditional memorial

prayer) asking for eternal peace for the deceased. Additional readings or musical offerings may also be appropriate.

At the funeral, the closed coffin remains in view. At the end of the service it is borne from the funeral to the hearse, and taken from the hearse to the gravesite by family or friends (pallbearers) selected by the mourners. Six pallbearers are usual; women and men, Jews and people of other faiths may all serve in this capacity, though immediate mourners generally do not. Staff of the funeral home will assist with moving the coffin.

- *Burial*

The burial service includes the repetition of the El Malei Rachamim prayer and the Mourner's Kaddish. The coffin is lowered and mourners and others are encouraged to cover the coffin with earth, after it has been lowered into the grave. Filling in the grave is considered to be a great act of chesed, of loving-kindness, as well as an important cathartic moment for the mourners. Mourners may leave the cemetery walking between two lines formed by family and friends offering support and comfort.

- *Mourning*

On returning from the cemetery, family and friends traditionally wash their hands before entering the house of mourning. This custom is an affirmation of life after the close contact with death. Also, a special *yahrzeit* candle, given by the funeral home, is lit, which burns for the next seven days. Usually relatives and friends will serve a meal of consolation to all who return from the cemetery with the mourners. If further help is needed in coordinating this or other elements of the mourning process, let the Rabbi or a member know and assistance will be provided.

- *Shiva*

The seven-day period of intense mourning observed by the immediate family of the deceased, beginning on the day of burial, is called *shiva* (Hebrew for seven). During the time of *shiva*, mourners are encouraged to remain home and refrain from routine activities, so that friends and relatives can visit and offer support. Mourners can use this time to adjust to the death, and to think about what life now will be like. Many families do not observe *shiva* for the full week or observe it to varying degrees. Depending on the mourners' preferences, Kaddish is said daily in the home in the presence of a *minyan* (10 people). This provides an opportunity for members of the congregation to join the mourners in prayers, reminiscences, and in offering emotional support. Members of Beth Israel will arrange evening *shiva minyanim* for the mourners for as many days as they would like.

There are numerous traditional customs associated with mourning, such as covering the mirrors in a house of mourning, having mourners sit on lower seats, not shaving or grooming oneself, and giving *tzedakah* (charity/righteousness) in honor of the deceased instead of flowers. In our practice, mourners make their own decisions about these and other customs.

While light food is usually provided for visitors during the shiva, families involved in mourning should not be concerned about hosting. Those who come will always bring sufficient food. Members of Beth Israel will help with these arrangements, and will publicize any particular dietary, or other requirements.

Shiva is suspended for Shabbat and major Jewish holidays, when mourners are encouraged to go to the synagogue to say Kaddish. Because the death is considered a loss for the entire community, the deceased's name will be read by the Rabbi or service leader shortly before the Mourner's Kaddish. Major festivals traditionally interrupt Shiva, often ending it early. Please consult with the Rabbi on this situation, as necessary.

At the end of the shiva it is customary for a friend or relative to walk those who are in mourning around the block to signify the end of this period.

If the death and burial occur out of town, congregants often hold Shiva or "post-shiva" minyanim when they return home, to receive the emotional support provided by the Congregation. Please contact the Synagogue office to arrange these minyanim.

- *Shloshim*

The thirty days after the burial are called the shloshim period, when mourners return to work and normal activities, but refrain from public entertainment or socializing. The kriaah ribbon is worn during this time. At the end of shloshim, there is an opportunity for another gathering of friends and family to commemorate this passage of time. At the gathering, the deceased is honored, often through sharing a story or something that has been learned, especially for the occasion.

- *Sh'nat Ha-evel (year of mourning)*

Traditionally, mourners say kaddish daily for eleven months.

- *Yahrzeit*

The anniversary of the death, rather than of the burial, is commemorated by saying kaddish in the synagogue and by lighting a yahrzeit candle at home. Yahrzeit candles burn for 24 hours. On the Shabbat preceding the yahrzeit, the rabbi or service leader will read the name of the deceased from the bimah. It is common to "unveil" the grave marker, before the first yahrzeit (first anniversary of the death) a ceremony about which the clergy can provide more information.