

congregation
ahavas israel
קהילה אהבת ישראל

Death and Mourning
in the Jewish Tradition:
A guide for mourners

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A Theology of the Body and Soul

The Torah, at the beginning of Genesis, tells the story of the creation of the first human beings. God took a clod of earth, formed it into a human figure, and breathed into it the divine breath of life. Each one of us is thus created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. Judaism believes that we have a soul (in more mystical traditions, three or five souls) in addition to our body.

In the Hebrew Bible, the word *nefesh* means throat, and by extension, body. *Ruah* means wind or spirit; and *neshama* means breath. In post-Biblical Hebrew, all three words refer to the soul. When the spark of life, the soul, leaves the body at the moment of death, the empty shell of a human being remains. As an image of God, the body, even in death, is holy.

When the breath of life leaves a body for the last time, our tradition teaches us that we should return the body to the place whence it came, the earth. The natural return of the body into the ground means that we do not embalm or cremate bodies; we do not use above-ground burial vaults; we do not use sealed concrete or metal grave liners; and we use caskets made entirely of wood.

During our lifetime, each of us develops special qualities and characteristics that make us unique among humanity. When we die, we leave behind the legacy and memory of our lives, as well as all physical possessions we have accumulated. Physically, we leave this world as we came in, with nothing. Although Judaism believes in an afterlife for the soul (heaven and hell), it is also deeply influenced by Biblical texts which consider the death of the body to be the absolute end of one's life. This is in contrast to the ancient Pharaohs, who spent their lives preparing for their deaths, building enormous tombs loaded with food, clothing, and money. Sophisticated rituals and embalming procedures preserved their bodies after death with great care. Their funeral ceremonies were examples of a denial of death on a grand scale. Our Jewish tradition, on the other hand, forces us to confront the loss of our loved ones by giving us the words and the rituals we need to bury them with love and simplicity.

Preparing a Body for Burial

In traditional Jewish burial, we do nothing to the body that would obstruct the natural process of decomposition. Embalming is a process of removing the fluids from the body and replacing

them with chemical preservatives. Because Jewish tradition does not permit embalming (except under circumstances in which the law requires it), the preparations for burial and the funeral take place as quickly as possible. Ideally, the funeral is on the day of death. Today, it is more common to delay the funeral until a day or two after death, in order to give family members time to arrive in town.

Autopsies are also not generally permitted, unless the law requires it or the information gleaned from the procedure can save the life of another person in immediate danger of death.

To prepare a body for burial, we call upon the *hevra kadisha*, the sacred [burial] society, made up of dedicated men and women who perform the *mitzvah* (obligation) of preparing the body for burial with great love and care. For reasons of modesty, the men on the *hevra kadisha* attend to deceased men, and the women attend to deceased women. They first perform the *mitzvah of taharah*, washing the body by pouring water over it. They then dry the body, and dress it in *takhrikhim*, the plain white linen burial shrouds. The adjectives that best describe a Jewish funeral are simplicity and equality, and nowhere is this more evident than when looking at the *takhrikhim*. Their simple design asserts that we are all equal in death. They have no pockets, symbolizing that no one, rich or poor, leaves this world upon death with material possessions. The white color symbolizes the purity of the departed soul. Next, the *hevra kadisha* may wrap the body in his or her *tallit* (prayer shawl), if the deceased or the family desire. Before placing the *tallit* around the body, one person cuts off one of the *tzitzit* (the fringes at the corner), a sign that the *tallit* is no longer fit for ritual use. Finally, the *hevra kadisha* places the body in the casket. The Hebrew word for casket, *aron*, is the same word for the cabinet in which we place the *sefer Torah*, indicative of the holiness with which we treat both our sacred books and the human body.

We bury in caskets made wood, so that the casket does not form a permanent barrier between the body and the earth; rather, it breaks down, allowing the body to return to the earth. Although metal hardware and nails are allowed, most kosher caskets have no metal parts at all.

Manufacturers use glue and wooden pegs to fasten the parts together. A kosher casket can be made of any kind of wood, but in keeping with the principle of simplicity (and the principle that

money is better spent on tzedakah in memory of the deceased than an expensive casket), we prefer a plain pine box.

In order to express our highest level of *kevod ha-met*, respect for the body, we should not leave it alone from the time of death until the time of burial. This *mitzvah* is known as *shemirah*, and one who sits next to the body or in a nearby room is known as a *shomer (m)* or *shomeret (f)*. Usually, several *shomrim* take shifts, and they customarily spend the time reading Psalms and studying. Often this is done by the *hevra kadisha*, although not every *hevra kadisha* does this.

Our tradition asserts that one who lived one's life as a Jew should be buried in a plot of land owned and controlled by the Jewish community, ideally a Jewish owned cemetery. The task of burial is a sacred *mitzvah*, and the land in which burial takes places is sacred, consecrated for the purpose of burial. When the community purchases land for a new cemetery or the expansion of an existing cemetery, the people gathers on the land to walk around its borders seven times. Just as God completed the creation the world in six days according to Genesis, and brought holiness into the world by sanctifying the seventh day; circling the new cemetery seven times is a way of sanctifying the land, setting it aside for its intended purpose. As the people gathers for this ceremony, it may also be seen as a way for the community as a whole to take ownership of the *mitzvah* of burial, and sanctify the space through their commitment to Jewish life and tradition.

The Funeral and Burial service

Despite the Jewish belief in the eternal life of the soul, the details of the actual passage into death are unknown. There are no Biblical texts which describe what happens to our souls after we die, and there is no single clear Rabbinic description either. When a loved one dies, those left alive typically feel the acute pain of their loss. They may also feel the fear of death, as the death of another reminds them of their own mortality. We have a natural and understandable tendency to want to suppress or avoid that pain and make it go away as quickly as possible. Funerals in the Jewish tradition are moments which encourage us to face our grief head on, confronting death and facing our pain rather than denying it and avoiding pain.

An embalmed body lying before us, dressed beautifully, hair styled, makeup perfect, limbs arranged just so, is a form of denial of death. It is easy to look at the body and think, 'He looks

wonderful’ or ‘She looks like she is only sleeping.’ It is part of the same mindset of those who market hermetically-sealed grave liners and water-proof caskets with a 100 year warranty against seepage. It reflects a desire to keep the body in pristine condition. Death is not pristine. Jewish tradition and ritual emphasizes the fact that the body is going to return to the earth through a natural process of decay and disintegration. For this reason, Jewish tradition prohibits embalming and viewings, and traditional Jewish burial does not seal the body from the earth around it. Many cemeteries require a grave liner to keep the grave from collapsing as the casket disintegrates. The grave liner that we use looks something like an upside down shoe box, mostly open to the earth at the bottom.

There are two common styles of funerals, both acceptable in Jewish tradition. Some people choose to have a graveside funeral service only. Some choose to hold a chapel service first, followed by a graveside burial service. A chapel service may be held in the synagogue (chapel or sanctuary) or in the funeral home. For some, having a funeral service in the synagogue is a fitting conclusion for a person whose life was immersed in the Jewish community. For others, having the funeral service in the synagogue may create unhappy memories of the sanctuary or chapel and may make it difficult to enjoy other aspects of Jewish communal life.

We should note that it is customary not to place flowers around the casket at a Jewish funeral, following the principle that money is better spent on tzedakah in memory of the deceased than on buying expensive flower arrangements that will soon wilt and die. If the synagogue or funeral home receives flower deliveries, they will typically hold them in a back room and give them to the family following the service rather than putting them out for display.

Prior to the service, we gather the immediate family members (at least the spouse, parents, children, and siblings) for a ritual called *k'riah*, or “rending.” Traditionally, upon witnessing or hearing of the death of an immediate family member, the person experiencing loss would respond by rending his or her garment. The torn garment is a both a symbol of grief and a physical depiction of death as a rend in our lives. Today, we generally delay *k'riah* until just before the funeral, although it is not inappropriate to do so at the time of death. Although the prevalent custom in this country is to pin a small ribbon on one’s garment, and do *k'riah* on the ribbon, I believe that tearing a garment is much more in keeping with the psychological value of

the traditional ritual. The rend in one's garment matches the rend in one's life in a way that a ribbon pinned onto the garment cannot replace. I encourage mourners to consider doing *k'riah* on a real garment, such as a tie, vest, sweater, scarf, or jacket. In either case, *k'riah* is done along with a short blessing, acknowledging God as the true judge, and a verse from Job. The blessing affirms one's faith in God and God's justice at a time when, from a human perspective, one may feel that there is no goodness or justice in the world. The verse from Job acknowledges that life and death are in the hands of God: "*Adonai* has given, and *Adonai* has taken away; may the name of *Adonai* be a source of blessing (1:21)." Children, in mourning for parents, do *k'riah* in a special place symbolically close to their hearts, on the left side of their lapel. All other mourners do *k'riah* on the right side. The torn garment or ribbon is worn during the entire first week of mourning, excluding Shabbat. Although only direct relatives of the deceased have an obligation to do *k'riah*, other family members may choose to do it as well.

Both a chapel service and a graveside service typically begin by reading and/or chanting Psalms or other appropriate Biblical passages or poetry, followed by a eulogy or eulogies. The purpose of a eulogy is to remember the fundamental values of the deceased. Some incidents illustrating those values may be humorous, but a eulogy should not be a stand-up comedy routine. A secondary purpose of a eulogy is to encourage the mourners to feel the grief of death. Jewish funerals typically do not emphasize the eternal soul basking in God's presence as a joyful event.

We conclude a chapel service with *El Malei Raḥamim*, a memorial prayer for the deceased, and then encourage the mourners and all others present to go to their cars for the procession to the cemetery. The pallbearers, typically six men or women capable of carrying at least 40-60 pounds, carry the casket out to the funeral car. At the cemetery, they carry the casket from the funeral car to the grave. Anyone may be a pallbearer, including immediate family or friends. Since it is our obligation as a Jewish community to bury our dead, we suggest that at least some of the pall-bearers be Jewish. However, non-Jewish family or friends may be pall-bearers.

The rabbi or cantor chant Psalm 91 while the pallbearers carry the casket to the grave. The procession stops seven times along the way. The hesitation in proceeding directly to the burial is a sign of our reluctance to part from our beloved. The pauses, according to a Midrash on the

book of Ecclesiastes, give the mourners a chance to think about the meaning of our lives (The seven pauses correspond to the number of repetitions of the word *hevel*, “vanity” or “breath,” in Ecclesiastes). On certain days in the Jewish calendar associated with festive occasions, we carry the casket without stopping. When we reach the grave at a graveside-only service, we may pause before lowering the body for a eulogy. At a burial service following a chapel service, we lower the body into the ground immediately and begin the process of burial by inviting the family and others to shovel earth into the grave.

It is a *mitzvah*, incumbent upon the Jewish community, for us to bury our dead. It is especially painful and difficult for the family of mourners to take a spade or shovel, and place earth into the grave and onto the casket. By participating in the burial, one is psychologically encouraged to feel the reality of the death. This is a very important step in the grieving process, one of the five experiences of grieving which psychiatrist Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross wrote about in her book, On Death and Dying (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance). Note that these experiences of grief are not sequential. It is normal to experience some or all of them in any sequence, and even to go back and re-experience a particular stage multiple times.

The mourners see the casket put into the earth and participate in the burial by putting earth into the grave. We encourage all others present to participate in the burial as well. Ideally, we fill in the grave before completing the burial service. Minimally, we cover the casket and put down the top of the grave liner. Our tradition is to use the back of the shovel for the first shovel full of earth, symbolizing our sadness and reluctance to bury our loved one. We put at least three shovels full into the grave - the number three symbolizes an action which is done intentionally, not casually, because we realize that burial is a necessary act, no matter how emotionally painful it may be. After we finish with the shovel, we place it back in the ground rather than directly handing it to another person, so that the next person should not appear too eager to continue with the burial. We thinly cover the casket with earth, lower the top of the concrete vault, and continue to fill in the grave above the vault. Most families complete the burial before saying kaddish and finishing the service. Occasionally, however, due to inclement weather or a small number of people at graveside, we cover the vault and say kaddish, inviting people to remain after the conclusion of the service to continue filling in the grave.

The kaddish prayer normally does not mention the dead. It is a doxology, functioning as a reaffirmation of one's faith in God despite one's loss. There is a special kaddish, known as the *kaddish d'itchad'ra* or burial kaddish, which is recited graveside (except at certain festive times of the year). This kaddish does contain a reference to the deceased, praying that he or she be raised to an everlasting life, a reference either to the resurrection of the dead in the messianic era, or to a life beyond the grave.

After reciting kaddish as the burial services comes to an end, the rabbi will ask the assembled to extend to the mourners the following words of consolation: *Hamakom y'naḥem etkhem b'tokh sha'ar av'lei tzion veerushalayim*, "May the Omnipresent comfort you among the rest of the mourners in Zion and Jerusalem." Sometimes, the assemble form two lines through which the mourners pass, and as they walk by recite the words of consolation. Words are hard to find at this point, especially words of comfort, so our tradition supplies us with brief comforting words with which to conclude the burial service.

A cemetery is a place of the dead. When the mourners and others leave the cemetery and return home, they re-enter a place of the living. Washing hands is a way of symbolically making a separation between these two places by washing off the impurity of death. Therefore, the first action upon leaving the cemetery and returning home is to wash one's hands by pouring water over them. Customarily, there are towels and a pitcher of water outside the door of the house of mourning on the day of the funeral.

***Shiva* - The Week of Mourning**

Jewish mourning ritual carries us through a time of chaos, and provides an order and a framework for us to begin to deal with our loss and make sense of our lives without our beloved parent, child, sibling, or spouse. It provides a way for the community to be with the mourners, to offer listening ears, and perhaps a few words of comfort. Emotionally, mourners are torn between their grief for their loved one who has just died, and the need to take care of themselves and their families, who still are among the living. Jewish mourning rituals are designed to assist the mourners' transition back to the land of the living.

Normally, when people come to our homes, we greet them at the door, take their coat, and offer them something to eat or drink. We are the hosts, and we receive visitors as guests. In a house of mourning, the mourners should not be hosts and the visitors are not guests, but rather comforters. For this reason, the door to the house of mourning is customarily left unlocked, so the mourners will not need to go to the door. Visitors let themselves in and should not expect to be greeted. Their role is to sit with the mourners and speak with them. They may offer simple words of comfort, but they should take their cues from the mourners. If the mourners want to talk, the comforters should listen. If the mourners want to sit silently, then the comforters can be a silent, supportive, presence. Sometimes the mourners, especially older women, will want to be good hosts and serve their visitors because by doing so they can pretend that nothing has changed. They slip into their role of hostess, so they don't have to let out their emotions. Visitors should try to discourage the mourners from serving them. Visitors should be aware that the week of mourning can be a very emotionally draining experience, and take appropriate cues to leave when the mourners need to eat or rest.

When the mourners return home from the cemetery, they immediately light a *shiva* candle. The word *shiva* means seven, and refers to the seven days of mourning. *Shiva* begins on the day of the funeral and ends on the morning of the seventh day. The *shiva* candle burns for all seven days of *shiva*. The light of the candle is a symbolic antidote to the spiritual darkness in which one is left after the death of a loved one. There is no specific blessing to say upon lighting the candle, although a reading is available from the Rabbi.

The phrase sitting *shiva* derives from another custom to sit on low stools or benches, or on chairs and couches with the cushions removed, during *shiva*. During the period of *shiva*, mourners are prohibited from certain pleasurable activities such as attending parties, wearing leather shoes or new clothes, watching television, playing games, listening to music, or engaging in sexual relations. They also limit excessive grooming and pampering of the body, such as taking long baths, shaving, or trimming nails, the idea being that the mourners should be in a state of social withdrawal during *shiva*, to allow them to focus on the grieving process. The same explanation is commonly given for the custom of covering the mirrors, so one does not spend too

much time on one's physical appearance. The mourners continue to wear their k'riah garment, their torn piece of clothing or the torn ribbon, for the period of *shiva*.

The first meal after returning from the funeral is known as the *se'udat havra'ah*, "meal of consolation," and generally consists of round foods, symbolizing the cycle of life, such as hard boiled eggs, bagels, round lentils, or chickpeas.

Although food is available for guests in many *shiva* homes, the person sitting *shiva* should not feel obligated to prepare or serve food to the visitors. Since in fact it is the visitors role to serve the mourners, it is appropriate for them to bring a simple dish for the family to eat at one of their meals. Sometimes there will be a family member or friend coordinating food so community members take turns bringing meals.

On Shabbat, mourners do not sit *shiva* publicly. They do not wear the k'riah garment or ribbon, and they may sit on regular chairs, and come to the synagogue. On Friday night, they customarily remain outside the service until after the song *lekha dodi*, at which time they are welcomed into the service with the words, *Hamakom y'naḥem otkha/otakh/etkhem* (*masc./fem./pl.*) *b'toch sha'ar av'lei tzion veerushalayim*, "May the Omnipresent comfort you among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem."

Since mourners should not leave the house during *shiva*, a minyan is commonly arranged in the house morning and evening, so they can pray with a community and recite kaddish.

The *shiva* customs we have outlined above are intended to provide an atmosphere in the *shiva* home conducive to mourning. The customs are many and varied, and too complicated for a brief explanation. For more in-depth information, we highly recommend the book, [A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort](#), by Dr. Ron Wolfson. [The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning](#), by Maurice Lamm is also a good resource.

Most mourners are obligated to recite Kaddish for 30 days following the day of the funeral, known as *sheloshim*. Children mourning for parents, however, recite kaddish for 11 months, following a tradition that the soul undergoes a period of judgement and purification following death, that might take up to a year. Because we don't want to assume that our loved one needs the full judgement period, we recite kaddish for one month less than a year. It is a common, however, for mourners to choose to say kaddish for 11 months for non-parental relationship.

Each year, on the *yahrzeit*, the day of the anniversary of the death, the immediate family members recite Kaddish. There is a custom to take an aliyah to the Torah and say Kaddish on the Shabbat prior to the Yahrzeit, and Ahavas Israel, like many traditional synagogues, reads the list of *yahrzeits* to be observed in the coming week at the end of the Shabbat morning service.

Special Issues in Jewish Law

There are several special issues within *halakha* that deserve mention in a booklet on burial and mourning customs: burial of non-Jewish spouses, suicide, pregnancy loss, and neo-natal death. There is another issue that often gets mentioned as problematic in Jewish burial but in truth is nothing but a *bubbemeiseh*, a Yiddishism meaning roughly “old wives’ tale.” It is often wrongly said that a Jew with a tattoo cannot be buried in a Jewish cemetery. The truth is that getting a tattoo is expressly against the Torah and Jewish law, but there is no connection between having a tattoo and burial in a Jewish cemetery.

Burial of non-Jewish spouses

The halakhic question of burial of non-Jews in a Jewish cemetery is complicated and beyond the scope of this panel. However, Ahavas Israel (and an increasing number of tradition congregations) have determined that although it is a mitzvah for a Jew to be buried in a Jewish cemetery, it does not invalidate the sanctify of a Jewish cemetery to bury non-Jews in it.

Recognizing that interfaith couples chose to be members of Ahavas Israel, that Ahavas Israel encourages membership and participation by interfaith families in the life of our congregation to the extent permitted by halakha and that Ahavas Israel has a long tradition of inclusion, Congregation Ahavas Israel permits interfaith burials in a special section of the Ahavas Israel cemetery.

Suicide

Judaism believes that life and death are in the hands of God. We are commanded to take care of our health and not to do anything to injure our bodies because they were created in the image of God. Doctors are charged with the task of healing, and forbidden to do anything that shortens their patients' lives. Suicide or assisted suicide, therefore, are against Jewish law.

In times past, people who committed suicide were buried in a separate section of the cemetery. Now, we understand suicide as an act of one who is mentally ill, and bury those who commit suicide in the regular part of the cemetery along with those who have died because of physical illnesses. Despite this, suicide remains a sin.

A Jew may not commit suicide, ask others to commit suicide, or assist in the suicide of someone else. However, in most cases, choosing to forgo treatment of an incurable condition is permitted, as is withdrawing medication or artificial respiration or circulation. In most rabbinic opinions, artificial nutrition and hydration are equivalent to medication and may be withdrawn.

The legislation legalizing permitted suicide will lead to a degradation in the value of human life. There are no convincing arguments for the need for assisted suicide that cannot be addressed by the greater use of palliative care, including better pain management and an openness by both doctors and patients towards an honest evaluation of the benefits and detriments of aggressive treatment.

It is our moral obligation to attend to the needs of the dying by making *bikkur holim*, visiting or caring for the ill, a critical part of our mission as Jews. Ultimately this, rather than accepting suicide as a legitimate course of medical treatment, will lead to a greater appreciation for the dignity of both life and death.

Pregnancy Loss

[Note: In classical halakha, there is no *shiva* for a child who dies prior to the 31st day of life. This goes back to a historical reality in which neonatal death and stillbirth were all too common, and it would have been an unreasonable burden on the family and the community to impose *shiva*. Today, thank God, such losses are much less common. The changed reality has made it desirable to observe full mourning rituals for babies who die prior to their 31st day of life, and partial mourning rituals for stillbirths.]

For a miscarriage prior to the fifth month of pregnancy, burial is desirable, but the halakhic sources are conflicted. They give a variety of opinions, ranging from an obligation to bury the fetus to giving permission to allow the fetus to be used for medical research.

A stillbirth, a baby who died in utero after 26 weeks, should be buried. The funeral liturgy designed for stillbirths begins with *k'riah* (tearing a garment), and consists of prayers and Psalms, a naming ceremony, and words of comfort to the family, and may conclude with the recitation of Kaddish. The full rituals of *shiva* are not observed, although the parents may observe some private practices associated with it (here, a distinction is made between stillbirth and neonatal death). Nevertheless, we may announce a one day *Yom Nihum*, day of comfort, and a 24 hour Yahrzeit candle may be lit in place of the seven day *shiva* candle. The parents may wish to have a minyan at their home, and the community should support the couple with the *mitzvah* of *bikkur holim*, visiting the sick, by visiting and providing for their needs. The parents may observe yahrzeit on the anniversary of the baby's birth (since the exact date of death is generally unknown, and delivery is at a later time).

Neonatal Death

There are varying opinions on the point at which full mourning practices begin for the birth of pre-term infants who do not survive. Around 26 weeks of gestation is the point at which the chances of survival are greater than 50%. At this point, it seems reasonable to require full mourning rituals.

The body is prepared by the Hevra Kadisha, and the parents and non-minor siblings have the obligations of full mourning practices, including the funeral, *shiva*, kaddish, and yahrzeit. The community has all of its obligations for *nichum aveilim*, comforting the mourners, including preparing the *se'udat havra'ah*, meal of consolation, and providing a *shiva* minyan.

A Summary of funeral requirements at Ahavas Israel

Halakha requires that a Jew be buried in a plot that is owned or controlled by a Jewish family or the Jewish community. Typically, this means that it is a *mitzvah* to be buried in a Jewish cemetery. The rabbi will officiate at the funeral of any Jew, as long as the following halakhic requirements are fulfilled:

- **The approved funeral homes are the Alt and Shawmut Chapel of Heritage Life Story Funeral Home, and Metcalf and Jonkhoff.** They understand the requirements for a

Jewish burial in our cemeteries and have worked with the Hevra Kadisha. Based on the principles of simplicity and equality after death, Jewish tradition prefers a plain, unfinished rectangular casket; however, any “kosher” all wood casket is acceptable. Both funeral homes have several caskets made entirely of wood from which to choose. We prefer the plain pine box. David Sauer, a synagogue member, builds kosher and green-certified plain pine caskets, naturalpinebox.com. The cost of buying direct from him is less than buying a casket from the funeral home, and under Michigan law they must accept an outside casket with no additional surcharge. Contact David for more details, (616) 805-3778, naturalpinebox@yahoo.com.

- **We do not have public viewing in Jewish tradition.** Embalming is prohibited in Jewish tradition (except in exceptional circumstances and when required by law), the Hevra Kadisha does not prepare a body for viewing, and they cover the body completely covered in plain white linen *takhrikhim* (shrouds). When the Hevra Kadisha finishes *taharah*, they put the body in the casket and seal it.
- **It has been a long standing policy of Congregation Ahavas Israel and its ritual committee that the use of a Hevra Kadisha and *takhrikhim* is a necessary precondition of burial in Ahavas Israel’s cemeteries.**
- **Since halakha does not allow cremation, the rabbi will not officiate at the funeral of one who is to be cremated.** Although the remains may be interred in a grave at the Ahavas Israel cemeteries, the interment is done under the supervision of the Ahavas Israel cemetery committee, with no clergy present. There is no Jewish ritual or liturgy for the interment of cremation remains.
- **Regarding non-Jewish burial in the designated Interfaith Burial Section, Congregation Ahavas Israel will permit interfaith burials subject to the following restrictions:**
 - Mixed faith member households of Congregation Ahavas Israel may purchase burial plots: one for the Jewish adult, one for the non-Jewish spouse/partner, one for any deceased minor child (age 18 or younger) and one for any permanently dependent adult child. No plots will be sold to non-members or B’nai Noah affiliates.

- Burial in the mixed faith section is restricted to mixed faith household members in good standing of Congregation Ahavas Israel. Two adults from each mixed faith member household and children as described in section 2 may be buried in this section. Non-Jewish burial will be permitted for the non-Jewish spouse/partner, minor children and permanently dependent adult children only.
- All normal cemetery policies, including preparation of the body by the Hevra Kadisha, the use of takhrikhim (burial shrouds), a kosher casket and grave liner, will apply to Jewish burial in this section.
- Regarding non-Jewish burial, the Hevra Kadisha will not prepare the body for burial, but the grave liner and casket must conform to regular cemetery policy. No non-Jewish funeral rites may be conducted graveside. **The rabbi, cantor, or other designated member of Congregation Ahavas Israel must be present at the burial.** Only the rabbi or cantor of Congregation Ahavas Israel, or other rabbis or cantors approved in advance by the rabbi of Congregation Ahavas Israel, will be allowed to officiate. No Hebrew or traditional Jewish prayers may be used, and while Biblical passages may be included, they will not be done in Hebrew. Poetry and eulogies are permitted.
- No religious symbols will be permitted on monuments, including headstones, foot stones, or any other marker. The design for the marker must be approved by the rabbi of the congregation. Markers or objects which are in violation of this policy will be removed at the expense of the family. Only the rabbi or cantor of Congregation Ahavas Israel, or other rabbis or cantors approved in advance by the rabbi of Congregation Ahavas Israel, will be allowed to officiate at any ceremony to dedicate or unveil a monument.

Vocabulary of Jewish Life

Aninut - The period between death and burial. A mourner does not go to synagogue or say kaddish during this time.

Onen/et - A bereaved person, during the period of aninut.

Aveil(im) - Mourner(s).

Menahem aveilim - One who comforts the mourners.

Beit olam - “an eternal home.” A cemetery.

Beit chayim - “a home for the living,” Another name for a cemetery, referring to the Jewish view that the soul lives on after the body dies.

B'tzelem Elohim - “in the image of God.”

El Malei Raḥamim - “God, full of compassion,” a memorial prayer for the dead.

Hamakom y'naḥem otkha/otakh/etkhem b'toch sha'ar av'lei tzion veerushalayim - “May the Omnipresent comfort you (masc./fem./pl.) among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.”

Hevra Kadisha - “Holy Society,” Those who prepares the body for burial.

Kever - a grave.

Kevod ha-met - respect for the deceased.

K'riah - “tearing” one's garment or ribbon.

Matzeivah - monument. The unveiling service for the dedication of a matzeivah may take place anytime after sheloshim has ended, and commonly takes place near the time of the first yahrtzeit.

Mitzvah - Commandment, Obligation

Nichum Aveilim - The *mitzvah* of “comforting the mourners.”

Se'udat Havra'ah - meal of consolation. The first meal after the funeral.

Shemirah - “guarding” the body from death until burial.

Shomer (m)/Shomeret (f) - One who does **shemirah**.

Shiva - “seven” days - The most intense period of mourning, the first week.

Sheloshim - “thirty” days - the next period of mourning.

Takhrikhim - the burial shrouds.

Taharah - “purification,” the ritual of preparation of the body for burial.

Tallit - Prayer shawl. See Numbers 15:37-41.

Kever Avot - “Ancestral graves.” It is a custom to visit one's family graves at certain times of the year, especially before the High Holidays.

Tzitzit - the ritual fringes on the corner of a *tallit*.

Yahrtzeit - The anniversary of the date of death.

What should I do when someone passes away?

1. Contact a funeral home. The local Grand Rapids area approved funeral homes are Alt and Shawmut Chapel of Heritage Life Story Funeral Home, (616) 453-8263; and Metcalf and Jonkhoff, (616) 940-7333. If you need an approved (Jewish) funeral home in another community, please contact Rabbi Krishef in advance of the death, if possible.
2. Contact the rabbi at the Synagogue office, (616) 949-2840. On Tuesdays or after normal business hours, you may contact him at home, (616) 459-4627. The rabbi will want to get some basic information from you, such as the English and Hebrew name of the deceased and the exact date and time of death, and which funeral home you have chosen.
3. If you do not own a burial plot, you will need to speak to the chair of the cemetery committee to purchase a plot. This may be done in advance of the death. The rabbi will tell you who to contact.
4. Set a day and time for the funeral. Since our desire is to allow the body to return to the earth naturally, burial should take place as soon as possible. The day of death is preferred, if possible, but if family members need to travel long distances, it may be delayed until the second or third day. If burial were to be delayed beyond three days, embalming might be necessary, which retards the natural decomposition of the body.
5. Set a location for the funeral (synagogue chapel or sanctuary, funeral home chapel, or graveside).
6. Choose a casket. There are several all-wood kosher caskets available. We prefer the plain pine box. David Sauer, a synagogue member, builds kosher and green-certified plain pine caskets, naturalpinebox.com. The cost of buying direct from him is less than buying a casket from the funeral home, and under Michigan law they must accept an outside casket with no additional surcharge. Contact David for more details, (616) 805-3778, naturalpinebox@yahoo.com.
7. Set a time to meet with the Rabbi to go over details of the funeral and burial service, speak about the eulogy, and schedule *shiva* minyan times.
8. The rabbi or office will notify the Hevra Kadisha to prepare and dress the body appropriately, and the office will send out a congregational notice (and also activate the

calling committee for those who have requested phone calls instead of or in addition to email) so we can notify the synagogue community of your loss, and inform them of funeral arrangements.