



Mourning Customs

Introduction

One of the primary purposes of the mourning customs is to help the mourners find a proper balance between their need to mourn and the necessity that Jewish tradition sees in returning to everyday living. Customs of mourning guide the mourners in appropriate behaviour at a time of grief and despair and help ease their confusion and doubts. As time passes, the expectation and hope is that people recover from their overwhelming grief, return to their routine, and require less and less external direction.

Jewish tradition divides the time of mourning into four distinct periods, based on how much time has elapsed since the death. Mourning customs are diminished in each successive period:

- a. *Aninut* – between death and burial
- b. *The Shiva* – the first week after burial
- c. *The Shloshim* – the first month after burial
- d. *The year* – the first year after burial
- e. *The anniversary of the death (yahrzeit)* is then observed annually, on the Hebrew date of death.

The mourning period varies depending on the nature of the relationship of the mourner to the deceased: one mourns parents for an entire year, and other relatives for thirty days.

The customs of mourning are many and varied, and differ from community to community. In this booklet, we emphasise the more commonly accepted customs.

a. Aninut

It is customary to light a candle at the time of death, which remains lit for the entire week. This is based on the verse, "For the soul of man is the candle of God" (Prov. 20:27).

The interval between death and burial is known as the period of "*aninut*." This is a period for the immediate family of introspection and of preparing for the funeral. Close family (parents, siblings, children, and spouses) are viewed by Jewish tradition as being preoccupied with the loss, and are thus absolved of traditional Jewish responsibilities such as prayers. Some of the mourning customs are adopted from this moment such as the customs of cutting one's hair, studying *Torah*, or engaging in marital relations. Furthermore, mourners at this stage may not eat meat or drink wine. If the period between death and burial extends over the Shabbat, then these customs are not adopted (except for refraining from marital relations), though they begin again following the *Shabbat*.

b. Shiva

Shiva commences immediately after burial. The mourners return to the house where they will "sit" and do not leave the 'mourning house' the entire week (or as directed by one's Rabbi). The day of the funeral will count as the first day of *shiva* even if the burial takes place just before sunset (in Jewish tradition, the day begins and ends at sunset). *Shiva* ends on the morning of the seventh day after burial, after the mourners have completed the morning prayer (*shachris*) and sat for a few minutes.

Community support and comfort

Mourners need not wallow alone in their grief; on the contrary, it is important to share grief with others and surround oneself with friends, family, and fellow mourners. The mourners customarily do not leave the 'shiva house' the entire week, and friends and acquaintances visit there. It is commendable to focus the conversations on the merits of the deceased.

Shiva customs

Immediately upon returning from the cemetery, the mourners partake in a meal, supplied by others (family or friends), called the se'udat havra'ah. At this meal, it is customary to eat round foods, such as eggs, lentils, and bagels symbolizing the life cycle.

Jewish tradition prohibits certain activities for the mourner during *shiva*. Throughout the week of *shiva*, mourners do not work. Friends and neighbours may take responsibility for preparing your food, serving it to you, cleaning up, and doing whatever they can to make this period of time easier for you. During this week, tradition discourages bathing, changing or laundering clothing, cutting hair or shaving, applying makeup or cream, wearing leather shoes, cutting nails, engaging in marital relations and participating in joyous events. These practices are based upon minimising the mourner's joy.

Mourners also do not study *Torah*, except for the portions that deal with mourning, nor do they greet others and inquire about their welfare. Mourners sit only on low benches. Different people regard these customs with varying levels of strictness. Some people spend the entire *shiva* in one house and even in one room, even when the house is small and there are many mourners. Others spend the day together but go home at night. Customs also vary regarding washing and applying ointments. Washing or applying creams for pleasure and wearing new clothes is generally discouraged. Some people, however, rinse, at least in cold water, parts of their body. For hygienic purposes, washing in tepid water is also acceptable.

These practices are not observed on *Shabbat*, with the exception of refraining from marital relations. See below for more details about mourning on *Shabbat*.

Prayer, blessings, and study in the shiva house

In order to enable the mourners to say *Kaddish* with a minyan, some people organise regular prayer services in the house in which the mourners are sitting *shiva*. One must arrange for a *Torah* scroll, prayer books, and kippot, as well as ten men above the age of thirteen who can commit to coming at prayer times. The order of prayer in the mourner's house is standard, but with some additions and omissions. At the end of the service, an extra Mourner's *Kaddish* is added, and Psalm 49 or 16 is recited. If one is unable to conduct prayer services in one's home, one may go to a synagogue in order to say *Kaddish*. It is customary in some mourners' houses to devote the time between the mincha and maariv prayer services to study *Torah*. Any text can be studied, though traditionally mishnayot are chosen (because of the similarity between the words "*mishnah*" and "*neshama*"). Generally, one selects mishnayot, whose initial letters spell out the deceased's first name, ones which deal with life and death, or *mishnayot* 4-7 in chapter 7 of tractate *Mikva'ot* (since its first letters spell out the word *neshama* – soul).

Necessary equipment

One needs to equip the *shiva house* with chairs, memorial candles that will remain lit for the entire week, and – if prayer services will be conducted there – a *Torah* scroll, prayer books, and *kippot*. Some people also set out a charity box, for deceased's soul. These items can generally be borrowed from a communal organisation or can be arranged with the Chevra Kadisha.

The door of the house is generally left open during the time when visitors are expected. In order to help visitors locate the correct home, it is customary to hang mourning notices on the front of the building and on the door of the house. If you wish to schedule a "rest period" during the daily *shiva* schedule, you can also specify on these notices the hours during which you prefer to receive visitors and those in which you want some privacy and rest.

It is customary in many communities that friends and relatives bring food during *shiva*. In some communities (particularly Sephardi communities), full meals are served to the comforters, in others, only light refreshments are served.

Visiting the grave

After sitting for a short time on the seventh day, all those who are present in your home at the time will say to you “Arise from your mourning” (“*kumu me-evleikhem*”) or other comforting verses. You will then stand up, put on your regular shoes, and drive to the cemetery, to the grave of the deceased. You may postpone the visit to the cemetery to later in the day, if it is more convenient for family and friends. At the cemetery, you should have a short ceremony during which certain Psalms (usually Psalms 33, 16, 72, 91, 104, and 130), and verses (from Psalm 119) whose initial letters spell the first name of the deceased and the word *neshama* (soul) are recited. This ceremony is concluded with the recitation of the Mourner's *Kaddish* (provided there is a *minyan*) and the prayer *El Malei Rachamim*. After the ceremony, it is appropriate to share personal thoughts and memories, if the family wishes.

Proper conduct when visiting mourners

- Visiting days: If you aren't a close relative or friend of the mourners or deceased, avoid visiting the mourner's home on the first or second day of *shiva*. Allow the mourners time to be by themselves and with their family.
- Visiting hours: Though you may have a very busy schedule, you need be considerate of the mourners – realize that they receive visitors all day long, and they are physically and emotionally worn out. Don't begin your visit after 9 PM. If you are in the mourners' house late at night, consider cutting your visit short. Many families rest between 1 and 4 PM so try not to visit then. If you come to the *shiva* house and see that you are the only visitor, consider returning at a different time so that the mourners can take the opportunity to rest a little. If you see that the mourner is eating, encourage him to continue – you can wait a few minutes for him or return later. Always remember that your objective is to comfort the mourner and not to inconvenience him in any way.
- What to bring: The mourners' families shoulder a heavy burden preparing the food, cleaning the house, taking care of the children, and hosting the visitors, particularly in communities in which all the visitors are served meals. Any food that you cook for them will be greatly appreciated. Try to bring the food in disposable dishes, so that no one will have to bother storing and returning your dishes. If you cannot prepare food that meets the mourners' standards of *kashrut*, consider bringing store-bought food. Bringing flowers to the mourners' house is not practiced in Jewish communities, and may even be viewed as insensitive since flowers are associated with happiness and not with mourning.
- What to say: Certain mourning practices exacerbate the unease that generally characterizes any visit to a mourner's house. Upon entering the mourner's home, the visitor generally does not extend greetings, and must instead find some sort of a substitute – a nod or some other opening line. Orthodox Jewish tradition also suggests that shaking hands, hugging or kissing mourners is discouraged and that guests not initiate conversation with the mourner, but instead wait for the mourner to start talking to them.

Upon leaving the mourner's house, it is customary to say,

המקום ” ינחם אתכם בתוך שאר אבלי ציון וירושלים”

“Hamakom Yenachem Etchem Betoach She'ar Aveilei Zion v'Yerushalayim”

“May you be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem and know no more sorrow”.

Mourning on Shabbat and festivals

Shabbat does not terminate the *shiva* period, but mourning is not observed on Shabbat. At the onset of Shabbat, mourners may bathe for hygienic purposes in tepid water, don clean clothes, and leave the house. They express no outward signs of mourning, but all private observances, such as the avoidance of marital relations, stay in effect over Shabbat.

Mourners customarily come to the synagogue on Friday evening after the congregation has sung “*Lecha Dod!*”. Before they enter the synagogue, one of the congregants announces their arrival. The congregation rises and makes room for the mourners, who then join the service. On their way to their seats, the congregants comfort the mourners as they would in the *shiva* house.

Unlike Shabbat, some festivals terminate or postpone the *shiva*. If burial takes place before a major festival (*Pesach, Shavuot, Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur or Sukkot*), the festival terminates the *shiva* period completely. If burial, however, takes place during the intermediate days (*hol ha-mo'ed*) of a festival, *shiva* is postponed until the conclusion of the festival, at which time *shiva* is observed for the regular seven days (Consult with your Rabbi re exact timings). *Purim* does not cut short the *shiva* period, though a mourner does change his clothes and leave his house in honour of the holiday.

c. Shloshim

Shloshim – the thirty days of mourning – begins at the time of burial, and not after *shiva* ends, so all mourning practices that relate specifically to the *shloshim* period, practically speaking, apply for only three weeks (after *shiva*) and not four. Some of the mourning practices continue into *shloshim* and some cease with the end of *shiva*. The stricter prohibitions no longer apply, but it is customary to avoid cutting one's hair, shaving, wearing new clothing, cutting nails, attending festive meals or weddings (some people attend the *chuppa* and the brit or pidyon haben ceremony, but not the party), or going to places of entertainment for the entire thirty-day period. Some people also don't wear freshly ironed or festive clothing, bathe in hot water, or listen to any music, even on the radio or television.

Mourners recite the Mourner's *Kaddish* for this entire period so even people who don't regularly pray in a synagogue make sure to do so during *shloshim*. Some people take it upon themselves to wear a *kippa* (or hat) while others light memorial candles during this whole period. If a festival (on which there is a prohibition against work) occurs during *shloshim*, the customs of mourning are cut short, just as they are for *shiva*.

At the end of *shloshim*, the deceased's family visits the grave. Some people erect a tombstone at this point, while others wait until the first anniversary of death. At the grave, it is customary to recite verses from Psalms, the Mourner's *Kaddish* (assuming there is a minyan), and *El Malei Rachamim*.

d. The year (12 months) of mourning

When one is in mourning for one's parents, most of the laws of *shloshim* apply for an entire year (in other words, for an additional eleven months, after *shloshim*). The mourner customarily does not attend festive celebrations or social gatherings, or wear new clothing. The precise practice regarding the shaving or cutting of one's hair can vary: some people extend the prohibition the entire year, while others shave immediately after *shloshim*. Jewish law requires that a man grow his beard wild (in mourning) until 'his friends reprimand him'. Therefore, if one's profession or status requires it, one can already shave when *shloshim* ends. One recites the Mourner's *Kaddish* (and goes to synagogue for this purpose) for 11 months from burial (for 10 months post *shloshim*). At the end of the year of mourning, family and friends visit the grave to conduct a short ceremony and share personal thoughts. In a Jewish leap year, the mourning customs cease after twelve months. Generally the family visits the grave on the anniversary of the death, even though it is thirteen months after the burial.

e. Anniversary (Yahrzeit) and Yizkor days

Every year, on the Hebrew date of death, the deceased's family customarily marks the day and remembers the deceased. It is customary to light a memorial candle that will burn for the entire 24-hour period, to visit the deceased's grave, and to conduct a short ceremony there. The giving of Charity (*Zedaka*) on behalf of the deceased's soul is most important. After visiting the cemetery, the deceased's family usually gets together to share memories, and to learn *Mishnah* (or other texts) for the soul of the deceased. Some people have the custom to be called up to the Torah on the Shabbat or Monday or Thursday before the *yahrzeit*. If you don't know where your loved one is buried, contact the Melbourne Chevra Kadisha. If you are unable either to locate the grave or to travel to it, you can conduct the memorial service in your house or synagogue.

It is customary to recite the *Yizkor* (remembrance) prayers four times each year: on *Yom Kippur*, the last day of *Pesach*, *Shavuot*, and *Simchat Torah*, after the *Torah* reading and before the *Mussaf* service. In these prayers, we remember both those for whom the entire congregation mourns – martyrs of the Holocaust and casualties of Israel's battles – as well as personal relatives who have died. One whose relative has passed away traditionally lights a memorial candle on these days. Some have the custom of waiting a year before reciting *Yizkor* on behalf of the deceased.

In calculating the Hebrew date of death, note that a Jewish day begins at sunset and ends at nightfall the following day (and not at midnight). If the deceased died, therefore, in the evening or night, his date of death will correspond to the Hebrew date of the following day.

FURTHER INFORMATION :

- YOUR RABBI OR SPIRITUAL ADVISOR Phone: _____
- MELBOURNE CHEVRA KADISHA (03) 9534 0208 www.mck.org.au
- "THE JEWISH WAY IN DEATH AND MOURNING" (ISBN:0-8246-0422-9) by MAURICE LAMM
- JEWISH CARE — 619 ST KILDA ROAD, MELBOURNE (03) 8517 5999
- AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR GRIEF & BEREAVEMENT (03) 9265 2100 www.grief.org.au

NOTES:

WHO TO NOTIFY WHEN SOMEBODY DIES

A CHECKLIST

There are a number of people and organisations that need to be informed of a death, in order to finalise a person's affairs and to make sure the correct help is given.

The following checklist may be used as a guide to help you organise things you need to do in the days and months that lie ahead. (Simply mark an 'X' on the left of those items that may apply to your situation, and then an X on the right hand side when it's done.)

This list is by no means an exhaustive one, but the most relevant contacts are noted.

To Do	Name of Person or Organisation	Contact Details	Date Contacted	Done
Government Agencies				
X	Centrelink	13 2300	MCK to do	X
	Department of Veterans' Affairs	13 3254		
	Overseas Pension – German Consulate	9864 6888		
	Overseas Pension			
	Victorian Electoral Commission	13 18 32		
	Vic Roads	13 11 71		
	Medicare	13 20 11		
	Australian Taxation Office	13 28 66 / 13 28 61		
	Local Council (Rates)			
Utilities				
	Electricity Company			
	Telephone Provider			
	Internet Service Provider			
	Post Office	13 13 18 or Local		
	Water / Gas Provider			
Medical				
	Family Doctor			
	Dentist			
	Chemist			
	Home Care/ Nursing Service			
Insurance Companies				
	Life			
	Health			
	Motor Vehicle			
	Home & Contents			
Employment				
	Employer			
	Superannuation Fund			
Legal				
	Solicitor			
	State Trustee			
	Executor of Will			

Financial				
	Banks / Credit Unions			
	Building Societies			
	Accountant			
Clubs				
	RSL Clubs & Sub Branch			
	Service Clubs			
	Sporting Clubs			
	Local Library			
Subscriptions				
	Newspaper			
	Magazines			
	Unions			
	Meals on Wheels			
Housing				
	Landlord			
	Department of Housing	1300 650 172		
Miscellaneous				
	Removal off Mailing Lists – Do Not Call Register	1300 792 958		

Sample letter for informing organisations / people of a person's death

To Whom It May Concern

Address

Suburb

State Postcode

Dear Sir/Madam,

I wish to notify you of the death of Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms _____

Surname _____

Given Names _____

Date of Birth _____

Street Name and Number _____

Suburb _____

State _____ Postcode _____

Date of Death _____

I understand the above had dealings with your organisation.

The reference number/ membership/ client number for your organisation was.....

Please amend your records accordingly.

If you need to contact me for further information, my name is..... and my

relationship to the deceased is.....and my phone number is

Yours,

Name and Signature.....

Name and Address.....

Post Code.....