

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT JEWISH FUNERAL PRACTICES

1. Question: Why is so much personal information required about the *met* (deceased) prior to the funeral?

Answer: The *met*'s Hebrew name (including his/her parents' Hebrew names), and possible status as a *cohen* or *levi*, is needed for the funeral and burial services. All the other information--parents' full names and places of birth, place and date of birth, citizenship status, highest level of education, profession, and social security number--are required by state/local authorities for the death certificates.

2. Question: Can a cemetery plot be purchased **after** a death?

Answer: Yes, but it would relieve the family of much stress and burden if they have purchased a plot in advance. The synagogue would then have a record of it, thus facilitating funeral/burial planning. If a plot has been purchased at one of Tifereth Israel's two cemeteries, it would further simplify arrangements for the family. Synagogue staff could then make all the arrangements, without necessitating the family's going to the cemetery, and handle all finances on the family's behalf. If a plot has not been purchased, and the family chooses to purchase a plot at the TI section of Mt. Lebanon Cemetery, synagogue staff could similarly make all the arrangements.

3. Question: Why are Jewish funerals scheduled so soon after death?

Answer: Judaism believes that nothing should be done to mask the reality and finality of death or to delay the natural decomposition of the body. Embalming and cosmetic beautification are forbidden. Funerals are thus scheduled the day after death or the next day. Accommodations may be made for family members who must travel great distances.

4. Question: Is the *met* dressed in clothes or jewelry? Is viewing of the body allowed?

Answer: No. The *met* is ritually washed, in a ceremony called *Taharah*, then dressed in simple white linen trousers and tunics, called *tachrichim*, with a *talit* around the shoulders (even for a woman, if she wore one in life). No jewelry, personal affects, or other adornments are permitted. Following *Taharah*, the *met* is placed in a simple, wooden, pine coffin, and the coffin is closed, not to be opened again. Out of respect for the *met*, there is no viewing.

5. Question: Can a fancier coffin be used?

Answer: No. At all Tifereth Israel funerals/burials, only a plain pine coffin, with holes drilled in the bottom, may be used. This is in keeping with Jewish tradition to maintain simplicity and equality, without regard to the economic status of the *met*, and to promote natural decomposition.

6. Question: Is cremation allowed by Jewish law?

Answer: No. Burial of the body in the ground, in a coffin, in a consecrated Jewish cemetery, is required. The body returns “to dust” by natural decomposition.

7. Question: Are organ donations allowed by Jewish law?

Answer: Modern *halachah* now encourages (some would even say, requires) organ donation, but only when the organ will go to a specific individual. This is true even if the specific recipient has not been clearly identified when the organ is harvested. Judaism does not, however, permit organ donation “for science.”

8. Question: What is *sh'mirah*? What is a *shomer*?

Answer: *Sh'mirah* means “guarding” or “watching;” a *shomer* (plural: *shomrim*) means “guard” or “watcher.” It is the Jewish custom, again showing respect for the dead, for the *met* to be accompanied, or guarded, by a rotation of friends, relatives, and congregants, from the time of death until the funeral.

9. Question: Who can be a *shomer*, or a pallbearer?

Answer: Any relative **other** than one of the immediate family members who are mourners (i.e., spouse, parent, sibling, or child), or any other person that the family chooses. Usually, at least six pallbearers are needed. In-laws and grandchildren are frequently selected, as well as more extended family and friends.

10. Question: Who handles funerals at Tifereth Israel?

Answer: The rabbi, staff, and congregants share this responsibility. The rabbi meets with the family, counsels them, and schedules and conducts the funeral and burial services. The TI executive director and administrator are central points of contact, help the family purchase plots and make cemetery arrangements, and assist with the funeral service. The TI Funeral Practices Committee, currently composed of four congregants, called *chaverim* (“friends;” singular: *chaver*), works closely with the family to make funeral arrangements, coordinates all details with the funeral home, and physically assists at the funeral and burial services.

11. Question: If a death occurs, whom should the family call first?

Answer: During normal weekday office hours, the family should call the synagogue first. A staff member will always be present, and he/she will contact the rabbi and one of the *chaverim*. During evenings and weekends, the family should call one of the *chaverim*, whose names and telephone numbers are listed each month in the *Menorah*, and can also be obtained by calling the synagogue and selecting menu item 6.

12. Question: Who is eligible for a Tifereth Israel funeral?

Answer: Any Tifereth Israel member or **dependent** (as defined by the Internal Revenue Service for tax purposes) of a Tifereth Israel member. Where the deceased is not a member or dependent, TI staff and **chaverim** will provide guidance to the family, but will otherwise not participate in funeral planning and execution, and the rabbi may not necessarily be available to conduct the funeral.

13. Question: May the family choose any funeral home to handle the funeral of a member or a dependent?

Answer: Yes, but if the family wishes to hold the funeral at Tifereth Israel, or use the services of the TI *chaverim*, they must use the services of Hines-Rinaldi, which has contracted with the Greater Washington Funeral Practices Committee, of which TI is a founding member, to provide a funeral package for a fixed price. Hines-Rinaldi's services may also be used, at a reduced price, if the burial is held outside of the Washington metropolitan area, or even if the funeral itself is held out of town.

14. Question: What are the advantages of using the Hines-Rinaldi contract funeral package?

Answer: There are many advantages. The family is assured that the funeral and all preparations will be *halachically* (in accordance with Jewish law) correct. The cost will be substantially below market prices for comparable services. The *chaver* will make all arrangements on the family's behalf and in accordance with their wishes. The family will be relieved of all logistical and financial burdens at a time of great emotional stress. Tifereth Israel will pay the cost of the basic funeral package (although the family is expected to eventually make a substantial contribution to the synagogue), and the family will not be billed by Hines-Rinaldi for costs not covered by the package (e.g. newspaper death notices, extra copies of the death certificate, limousine services, mileage charges for out-of-area transportation) until 30 days after the funeral.

15. Question: What are the advantages of using one of Tifereth Israel's two cemeteries?

Answer: The costs of plots and of opening and closing the grave are comparable to or lower than those in other cemeteries. Tifereth Israel staff can make most, if not all, of the arrangements for purchasing a plot, signing contracts and making payments, on the family's behalf, thus relieving the family of having to visit the cemetery or arrange finances at a time of great stress. As with contract funeral costs, TI is working toward paying cemetery costs up-front, and not billing the family until 30 days after burial.

16. Question: When is *Kaddish* (the mourner's prayer) first recited?

Answer: *Kaddish* is first recited at the cemetery, after the coffin has been lowered into the grave. *Kaddish* is not recited at the funeral service itself. Another prayer, *Eil Malei Rachamim* (God, Full of Compassion) is chanted by the rabbi at both the funeral and burial services.

17. Question: How and when is the grave filled?

Answer: At the completion of the burial service, before the family leaves the cemetery, the coffin is covered by the mourners themselves, other relatives, friends and congregants. Typically, each family member or other participant places three or more shovelfuls of earth over the coffin until the coffin is fully covered. This one last *mitzvah* is an expression of love and respect for the *met*, and is not left to strangers. It is also a tangible way for mourners to recognize the finality of the death. After the family leaves the cemetery, other congregants may complete the filling of the grave, or, alternatively, this is done by cemetery staff.

18. Question: What is *Shivah*?

Answer: *Shivah*, which means "seven," is the first of three periods of mourning following burial. During this seven-day period, the mourners refrain from work, remain at home, and receive visitors who come to comfort them and bring prepared foods. A seven-day memorial candle is lit. Mourners recite the *Kaddish* at services which are held each evening (and each morning, if the family chooses) in the home, except on Shabbat, when mourners attend services at the synagogue. The family is not expected to entertain or feed visitors, who are urged to keep their visits brief and to respect the mourners' needs and sensitivities.

19. Question: What are the other two periods of mourning?

Answer: The remainder of the first month following burial is called *Sh'loshim* ("thirty"). Mourners return to work, but continue to say *Kaddish* and refrain from major social activities and festive events. Mourners whose spouse, sibling or child has died are not required to say *Kaddish* after *Sh'loshim* ends. Mourners whose parent has died observe a third period of mourning called *Shanah* ("year") for another 11 months following *Sh'loshim*, during which they continue to refrain from joyful activities. For the first 10 of these months they continue to say *Kaddish*, for a total of 11 months in all.

20. Question: When is a memorial stone or marker placed on the grave?

Answer: This is done during the first year after burial, any time after *Sh'loshim* ends. Typically, however, families prefer to place a stone or marker on the grave on the first anniversary of the death. When the stone or marker is "unveiled" the family assembles at the gravesite, shares their memories of the deceased and recites the *Kaddish* and *Eil Malei Rachamim* prayers.

21. Question: What are *Yahrtzeit* and *Yizkor*?

Answer: *Yahrzeit*, which means “anniversary” in Yiddish, is the anniversary of the deceased’s death according to the Jewish calendar. Each year at this time a 24-hour memorial candle is lit in the home and *Kaddish* is recited in the synagogue. *Yizkor*, which means “He will remember” or “may He remember,” is the memorial service, ending with the *Kaddish*, recited in the synagogue four times a year--at *Yom Kippur*, *Sh’mini Atzeret*, the eighth day of *Pesach*, and the second day of *Shavuot*. A 24-hour memorial candle is lit in the home at these times. It is customary to make contributions to the synagogue or other charities for *Yahrtzeit* and *Yizkor*.