

WHEN SOMEONE DIES:

## What to Do Before, During, and After the Death of a Loved One

*Judaism regards death as part of the cycle of life. At Kol Ami we think it is important to conduct end-of-life planning while we are still in good health and, hopefully, far from death. When someone dies, we hope you and your loved ones will be empowered to walk through difficult times with information at your fingertips. And we hope you will be comforted knowing that your community and clergy are available to help you with practical assistance and to sustain you in your grief.*

*Dying involves both the body and the soul in the greatest transition we are ever called upon to make. Death may be inevitable, but dying alone or in fear does not have to be. In Western society, many have lost touch with the spiritual aspect of death and dying. Medicine and technology valiantly (and wonderfully) save lives, yet often treat death as a failure or an embarrassment. Our ancient Jewish traditions offer a different approach: an emphasis on the dignity and needs of the dying, showing honor to the dead, enveloping the deceased's loved ones in a caring community, and allowing mourners the time and respect to walk through the period of mourning at their own pace.*

*This Guidance is intended to help Kol Ami members plan for the end of life, now and when the time comes. Feel free to make use of, and share, the information below:*

- I. **Advance Planning for End of Life** – includes making wills, ethical wills, medical directives, purchasing cemetery plots, and more.
- II. **When Someone Dies** – what to do in the moment, whom to call, first steps and next steps, the funeral and shiva and beyond.
- III. **Resources** – websites, background information, poems, prayers, and more.

*Kol Ami is grateful to Shirat HaNefesh and to Temple Solel in California for their thoughtful and helpful guidance. Much of the material in this document is taken from [The Jewish Path in Death and Mourning](#) by Maurice Lamm.*

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# I.ADVANCE PLANNING



## CHECKLIST FOR ADVANCE PLANNING

This page is a checklist you may wish to use in order to prepare in advance for a death in your immediate family.

- ☐ Create a "When I Die" folder, including everything listed below. Make sure your close family members and friends know where it is, or give them a copy of it.
- ☐ Write a Will and have it properly notarized; if appropriate, consult with a lawyer to draw up a trust.
- ☐ Create a Medical Directive and have a conversation with family about end-of-life preferences
- ☐ Give copies to your loved ones and primary caregiver/physician
- ☐ Make arrangements to purchase a plot in a cemetery
- ☐ If there are travel issues, contact the funeral homes at both locations to discuss procedures.
- ☐ Decide whether to have any military honors, if appropriate.
- ☐ Write an Ethical Will
- ☐ Decide whether you would like taharah performed (the traditional ritual washing and preparation of your body for burial)

- \_\_\_ If you do not want taharah, decide what clothing would be appropriate for burial
- \_\_\_ Decide whether or not you want shomrim to stay with the body until burial
- \_\_\_ Decide whether and where the family would sit Shiva
- \_\_\_ Write down the name(s) of the organization(s) (such as Kol Ami, the American Cancer Society, etc.) to which you would like donations to be made in your honor after your death.
- \_\_\_ Have a family discussion about Shiva, Shmirah, funeral, etc.

IMPORTANT PHONE NUMBERS:

## Creating a “When I Die” Folder

The hours and days immediately following the death of a loved one are a particularly stressful time for immediate family and friends. You can make this time a little easier for them by creating a “When I Die” folder with all the necessary information about your wishes. It is important to let family members and friends know in advance where this folder is, or to make a copy and share it with them.

Below are some things you may want to include in your “When I Die” folder:

- A copy of your Last Will and Testament, and instructions regarding where to find the original
- Documents concerning any arrangements you have made in advance, including your desires regarding the disposition of your remains
- Whether you would like to have shmirah, which means there will be a person with your body at all times, day and night, until the burial
- Whether you would like to have taharah (ritual washing) performed on your body
- Your Ethical Will
- A copy of other pertinent documents, such as trusts, life insurance policies, financial documents, etc.
- Contact information of those people whom you would like to have notified of your death
- Any wishes regarding funeral arrangements, your obituary, or your gravestone (if applicable)

## 2. Writing an Ethical Will

An Ethical Will is a document that offers you a final opportunity to tell your family and friends what really matters to you. It helps organize your thoughts and communicate the most essential things you have learned in life. Of all the things you leave your family and friends, this may be the most important.

*While a Last Will and Testament enables us to pass on our material wealth, an ethical will, or tzava'ah, allows us to transmit something infinitely more valuable than that: our spiritual wealth - our ethics, our principles, and the meaning we have derived from our lives. An ethical will can speak for us long after we die . . . it speaks from us, in our own words.*

- Rabbi Stacy Friedman, Rosh Hashanah 1996

For more information about writing an ethical will, see the book *So That Your Values Live On: Ethical Wills and How to Prepare Them*, by Nathaniel Stampfer and Jack Riemer. The authors suggest six steps to writing the will, including how to communicate with your loved ones about your values, your history, and your wishes for the future as well as practical steps about deciding when to present your ethical will and how best to preserve it.

Our rabbi will be happy to meet with you if you would like to discuss your Ethical Will.

## 3. Creating an Advance Medical Directive / Having the Conversation

Advance medical directives are extremely important because they enable you to make medical treatment decisions well in advance of need, so that if a time comes when you are seriously ill and unable to communicate or make decisions, the document(s) usually will prevail. An advance directive may be two separate documents or a two-part document. One part describes treatments you may or may not want at the end of life, and the other part appoints a trusted proxy or agent to make decisions for you, especially regarding matters not clearly stated in the first part. You may prepare this document on your own, use available forms, or consult an attorney to help you write it. If you later regain the ability to make and express decisions, the document will not then be in effect. You should share your advance directive widely with your agent, family, friends, and health care providers and bring it with you if you are hospitalized.

**A.** There are also two important medical orders that may be used by doctors and healthcare providers to help make vital decisions later, as you approach the end of life. You may be asked to sign a DNR (do not resuscitate) Order which states you do not want cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), electric shock, or intubation, if your heart or breathing should stop.

**B.** The other is a portable medical order, known as a POLST (Physician Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment,) is designed to help healthcare professionals and loved ones know and honor your treatment wishes in greater detail. You can find additional information about POLST at [www.virginiapolst.org](http://www.virginiapolst.org).

Even if you are not comfortable signing a POLST, having a conversation with near ones about end-of-life goals, fears, and wishes (if you are able to do so) is highly advised. This reduces uncertainty and guilt for you and your decision maker, and reassures everyone that they are

following your directives. We recommend consulting the [conversationproject.org](https://conversationproject.org) website and using their sample questions and discussion prompts to provide the best opportunity for making supportive decisions at life's end.

## 4. Organ and Tissue Donation

From Reform to Orthodox, all movements in Judaism support the donation of organs and tissue after death. A 1968 Reform responsum commented that the use of organs and tissues of the deceased to heal or save a life is in keeping with Jewish tradition and a positive act of holiness. In fact, the value of *pikuach nefesh* (the saving of a life) underscores this belief within our entire community. In the Orthodox community, the Halakhic Organ Donation Society (HODS) has as its mission to educate Jews around the world about halachic support for organ donation from Jews to the general public. HODS also offer a unique donor card that allows a person to specify under which circumstances (brainstem death or cardiac death) the donor permits organ donation to take place.

More commonly, organ donation can be indicated by signing the section on your driver's license application or renewal that indicates you want to be a donor. Be sure to discuss your wishes with your family and your healthcare providers. Please note that you can still request *taharah* (ritual washing) for a loved one even if he or she donated organs or tissue.

## 5. Arranging for a Burial Spot

We recommend that families make decisions about where to be buried well in advance of need. Doing so removes the burden from your family at a time when time is short and decisions are fraught with emotions; it also allows for your wishes to be followed.

A list of Jewish cemeteries in the Washington area can be found here:  
<https://www.jewishfuneralsdc.org/dc-area-cemeteries>.

**Cremation** has long been discouraged in Jewish tradition but is increasingly sought out as an option in our own day. From an environmental point of view, the relative impacts of cremation and burial are difficult to assess. Traditionally, the preference for burial is aimed at returning the body to the earth; if cremation is chosen, the ashes can still be buried, and in some cases at a Jewish cemetery. Please consult with our rabbi on options.

## 6. Learning about Funeral Homes

There is no need to enter into a contract in advance with a funeral home, but it is helpful to know about the options available. Funeral homes handle the preparations for burial and a host of other tasks; they do not handle cemetery plots, the opening and closing of a grave, or purchase of a monument.

The Jewish Funeral Practices Committee of Greater Washington promotes funerals that reflect Jewish laws and values. The contract, negotiated by the Committee, sets a very reasonable, fixed price for all funeral arrangements, including picking up the body and storing it, purchase of

a plain pine coffin, use of the chapel at the funeral home, rental of a hearse, and listing of a death notice. (Not included is the cost of the cemetery plot or the opening and closing of the grave, or the marker.)

The [JFPCGW contract](#) is available to anyone in the Washington area who requests a Jewish funeral. The contract in Virginia is with Cunningham Turch Funeral Home in Alexandria (703-549-1800). You must specify that you want the JFPCGW contract.

Other Jewish funeral homes in our area include:

- Northern Virginia Jewish Funerals
- Torchinsky Hebrew Funeral Home
- Sagel Bloomfield Danzansky Goldberg Funeral Care

### **Choosing a Coffin**

For generations, Jews have been buried in a plain pine box or even just white shrouds. Local laws require that the deceased be buried in a coffin; our tradition of burial in a plain wood box fulfills this requirement. These coffins can be purchased at the funeral home. Tradition emphasizes the simplicity and equality of the casket – that both rich and poor are buried in the same type of coffin, and that no attempt is made to adorn the casket or mask the reality of death.

## **7. Planning for a Gravestone**

Some people make arrangements for a gravestone well in advance; others wait until after the funeral takes place. A marker or monument on the burial site is a very ancient tradition. It serves a number of purposes, but its most essential purpose is to honor the dead. It is possible for you to decide what you want on your marker as you pre-arrange your needs. The custom in our area is for the gravestone to be unveiled at a ceremony about a year after the death of a loved one, but the unveiling can take place any time after the Shiva week.

The Jewish Funeral Practices Committee of Greater Washington has negotiated a [contract](#) with a local monument dealer that applies to five cemeteries in the local area.

## **8. Considering Shmirah and Taharah**

Jewish tradition explains that when a person dies, the spirit clings to what was most familiar to him or her, namely, the body. Some people believe a person's spirit remains close to the body until burial, so it is important to treat the body with respect and with the awareness that the person's spirit is able to observe all that is happening to him or her. Kol Ami does not have a formal Chevra Kadisha -- the traditional name for the committee that handles disposal of the body -- but our rabbi can be helpful in explaining these customs and what options are available.

### **Shmirah (Watching Over the Deceased)**

This word comes from the Hebrew word meaning to guard or to watch over, and refers to the practice of sitting with the body of the deceased between the time of death and burial. This comes down to us from ancient times when there was fear of harm to the body from a number of sources. There is also a mystical tradition that the soul is reluctant to leave the body; thus, *shmirah* is a community's way of showing honor to the deceased that it is being accompanied at all times until burial. In our own time, *shmirah* can be an enormous comfort to the family of the deceased, as well as a loving farewell tribute on the part of relatives, friends, and the community. Typically, a *shomer* (male) or *shomeret* (female) sits with the casket, day and night, and reads psalms, poems, or other appropriate texts. Usually people will sign up for 1 or 2 hour shifts throughout the day and night until shortly before the funeral. *Shmirah* usually takes place in an adjoining room where the shomer can see the casket; the body of the deceased is never visible during this time.

### **Taharah (Ritual Washing of the Body)**

Taharah means purity, and it is the act of ritually washing the body. Members of the Chevra Kadisha /Sacred Society will wash the body, read prayers, pour ritual water over the body as an act of spiritual purification, dress the body for burial, and place the body in the coffin. Female members perform taharah for a female deceased; male members perform taharah for a male deceased. Members of the Chevra Kadisha act anonymously and never discuss the details of their holy work. Kol Ami does not have its own Chevra Kadisha but taharah is available through several avenues in the community.

### **Tachrichim (Dressing of the Body)**

Traditionally, the deceased are dressed in natural linen shrouds; these differ slightly depending on the gender of the deceased. Not everyone wishes to be buried in these shrouds; please discuss with the rabbi what your wishes are.

If you would like either *shmirah* or *taharah* for a loved one who dies, inform the rabbi about your wishes as soon after the death as possible. The rabbi will contact the wider community to arrange for *shmirah* and *taharah* for people using the Jewish Funeral Practices Committee contract. If you choose a Jewish funeral home, they will provide these services for your loved one.

## **9. Thinking about Shiva**

The word "Shiva" means "seven," and it refers to the seven days mourners traditionally observe after the death of a close relative. During this time, friends and family come to the house of the mourner to comfort them, and to participate in a prayer service, usually once per day. This is the time to bring food and beverages to the home of those in mourning. During the service we share stories about the person who died, and recite the Mourner's Kaddish. Shiva is not observed during Shabbat and Jewish holidays.

In many American Jewish communities, Shiva is often shortened to 3 days, or to 1 day. Also, in a departure from traditional practice, mourners often feel that they must entertain and feed the people who come to visit them. This is directly opposite of the intention of Shiva, which is for the community to show its caring for the mourners, not the other way around. To support the mourners, Kol Ami is committed to taking care of one evening of Shiva for our members



including setup and cleanup, and providing a meal before a Shiva or after the funeral (as the mourners prefer). For those whose loved ones are buried out of town, Kol Ami will help facilitate a memorial service where stories and memories can be shared.

We strongly encourage members to sit Shiva for relatives and to speak to their loved ones about their wishes for sitting Shiva. Shiva is not only for the living, but also a tribute and final honor to the dead. It is a time to reconnect with community and to weave together the fabric of a mourner's life that has been torn asunder.

Although Shiva usually takes place at the mourner's home, Kol Ami can make arrangements to hold Shiva at another location.

## **10. Designating Tzedakah**

Advance planning gives you an opportunity to consider which organizations you would like to contribute to so as to benefit those who are still living. In your will or ethical will, write down the name(s) of the organization(s) (such as Kol Ami, the American Cancer Society, etc.) which you would like donations to be made after death.

## **11. When Death is Imminent**

Jewish rituals before and after death address the psychological needs of the dying and articulate Jewish values regarding deep philosophical issues. A long-standing practice of Judaism is the recitation by the dying person (or one who says it on his/her behalf ) of the Vidui, a confessional prayer (see Section IV, Resources, for a two versions). This prayer asks God to forgive the dying person's sins and to protect his/her family. It ends with an affirmation of faith in God and the Shema. (Some people choose just to recite the Shema.) Reciting the Vidui on the deathbed is an act of teshuva (turning or returning). It is like cleaning one's slate; one returns to, or affirms behavior appropriate to one created in God's image.

In the best of situations, the dying person recites the Vidui at home in a lucid state, surrounded by loved ones. More often, however, this is not possible. The patient may be in a hospital setting or other medical facility and may not be conscious. In such cases, family or friends may recite the Vidui on the patient's behalf. Praying with/for a loved one who is dying is considered a mitzvah and a way of saying good-bye.

In the last moments of a person's life, family and friends should surround him or her if possible. When death comes, the family or whoever is present should close the eyes and mouth of the deceased and cover the body with a sheet. Those present may want to say a prayer, such as Psalm 23, which affirms the goodness of life, seeks the comfort of God, and connects the family and friends to the generations of our people who have gone before.

# **II. WHEN SOMEONE DIES**

## 1. Immediate Steps

The following steps are most relevant if the funeral will be held in this area. If the funeral will be held out of town, you may still want to follow some of the steps below. The Rabbi is available for consultation, and will want to know the situation to provide comfort for your family and assistance with practical efforts when your return.

1. If possible, locate your loved one's **"When I Die" folder**, so you know what s/he wanted.
2. **Funeral Home:** Decide on a funeral home and arrange for the funeral home to pick up the body.

If you wish to make use of the Jewish Funeral Practices Committee contract, call [Cunningham Turch Funeral Home](#) in Alexandria VA (703-549-1800). Cunningham Turch will arrange for pick-up of the body. Otherwise, call the funeral home you will be using.

3. **Date and Time of Funeral:** Arrange for the day and time of the funeral in consultation with the rabbi who will officiate and the relevant funeral home (see under Funeral, below). Purchase a coffin (usually this is included in the funeral home contract). Provide the cemetery plot information to the funeral home, or if needed, purchase a cemetery plot.
4. **Contact Kol Ami:**

Call or email the Kol Ami coordinator at 571-336-5544, [coordinator@kolamivirginia.org](mailto:coordinator@kolamivirginia.org). Or call the Rabbi directly.

The coordinator will contact the Rabbi and the Chair of the Care and Concern Committee.

The rabbi will provide you with direction and walk you through the process of mourning, burial, funeral, and Shiva. Consider who in your family or circle of friends might want to give a eulogy or offer a reading. Often it is helpful to bring family and friends together to meet with the rabbi and discuss the funeral service as well as the details of the loved one's life.

5. **Preparing the Body:**

Be sure to tell the Rabbi right away if you want shomrim to watch over the body until the time of burial and if you want taharah. Kol Ami will try to provide volunteer shomrim to the extent we are able; paid shomrim are available through the Jewish Funeral Practices Committee. A combination of volunteers and paid shomrim can also be arranged.

Taharah is available from the Orthodox community in the area, and can be arranged by contacting Cunningham Turch Funeral Home (703-549-1800). The

traditional burial shroud is included in taharah, so you do not need to pick out any clothes for the deceased.

If you do not choose taharah, then you will need to provide the funeral home with clothing for the deceased. There is a tradition of burying a Jewish man in his tallit, with at least one of the tzitzit cut. If that is the preference, you will need to provide the tallit to the funeral home. If the tallit can be handed down to a member of the family, we think that is an even higher use for this ritual item. A man (or woman) can be buried in a simple tallit that they did not own, if that is desired.

6. **Calls to Friends and Family.** You may want to enlist friends and relatives to help make calls or let people know about the death.
7. **Notifying the Community.** If the funeral or Shiva will be held locally, Kol Ami will send out an email to the congregation inviting them to perform the mitzvah of comforting mourners by attending.
8. **Death Notice.** Having a death notice published in a local newspaper is usually handled by the funeral home, sometimes for an additional fee. It is customary to give tzedakah (donate to charity) in memory and honor of a loved one. Beyond Kol Ami, you may want to think about other organizations your loved one respected and include those in the death notice.
9. **Note to the Community.** Only if you are a particularly close friend of the deceased and/or family should you call or visit the house of the bereaved during the period between the death and the funeral. Save the visits and calls for after the funeral.

## 2. The Funeral

### Timing

Jewish tradition encourages the burial of the dead as soon as possible after death. The reason for a speedy burial is based upon respect for the person who has died, to prevent the family from witnessing any signs of decomposition of the body. Also, for the family that has lost a loved one, to delay burial only prolongs the mental and physical strain of the initial loss. All that said, there might be reasons for the delay of burial, such as if relatives must travel a great distance, or if it is Shabbat or a major Jewish festival. Please discuss your needs with the rabbi. The funeral home will also assist you in determining the time of the funeral.

The funeral service generally lasts from thirty minutes to an hour. Usually, the officiating rabbi will give a eulogy based on information that the family has provided. Friends and family members may also want to speak briefly. No one should feel pressured to speak at the funeral if that would be uncomfortable. (It may be more comfortable to talk at Shiva services, in a more intimate home setting.) The funeral usually also includes readings from Psalms and the El Malei prayer for the soul of the deceased. At the graveside, additional words of comfort and the Kaddish are recited.

## **Location**

Most funeral services are held in the chapel of the funeral home. Sometimes the entire service is conducted at the grave; this is often weather-contingent.

## **Kriah**

The ceremony of *Kriah* at the beginning of the funeral —the rending (tearing) of clothing by the mourners—symbolizes the family’s grief and loss. Originally, the *Kriah* practice took the form of tearing an article of clothing (on the left side for a parent, on the right side for other relatives). More recently a practice has developed of cutting a small black ribbon, which can then be attached to one’s clothing. In either event, the rabbi officiates at the actual tearing or cutting. The funeral home provides *Kriah* ribbons.

Mourners are encouraged to wear this ribbon throughout the Shiva period as a reminder to others that their lives have been forever altered.

## **Interment**

At graveside, the coffin is physically lowered into the grave. It is traditional that this be done in the presence of the mourners. The sight of the actual interment emphasizes the reality of death without fantasy or illusion. The family and friends attending the funeral each place some dirt into the grave, onto the coffin. This is usually done with a shovel. We use the shovel in a manner different from usual shoveling, to symbolize that this is not a normal everyday task. Our usual custom is to cover the casket; among Orthodox communities, the custom is to completely fill the grave, as if to tuck the loved one into the earth. At the end of the interment, those present form two lines, allowing the mourners to walk between them and sense the comfort of the community. It is customary to say to the mourners, “May you be comforted among all the mourners of Zion.”

# **3. The Mourning Process: Shiva**

## **Sitting Shiva**

The initial portion of the formal mourning period is called Shiva (seven in Hebrew), and is essentially a period of time, approximately seven days from the day of the funeral (not including Shabbat), which is set aside for intensive mourning by the family and friends. Some people choose to observe the full seven days of Shiva and some only a few days. Sitting Shiva is intended not only to comfort the mourners but also to show honor to the deceased.

During Shiva, people generally gather in the evening in someone’s home for a short service that includes the Mourner’s Kaddish, followed by the sharing of stories and memories by the bereaved. As noted earlier, Shiva does not have to take place in the mourner’s home; Kol Ami can make arrangements to hold Shiva at the UUCA or another location.

Choices about Shiva in American communities today are guided by many factors. Many people in our community have family members in distant locations, so sitting Shiva in our area might be limited to only a day or two. As with many of the choices, we encourage you to consult with the rabbi – both about the length of Shiva and the type of services held. You can let the rabbi or volunteer service leader know your preference about length of service and whether you prefer it to be mostly in Hebrew or include a lot of English, whether you would like the traditional liturgy or to supplement it or replace it with poems and readings. Even if no formal service is held, we encourage you to set aside time to reflect on the deceased and to help those present understand the life that has been lost. Generally, the Shiva service and reflections run 30-45 minutes.

The rabbi and/or the Ritual Committee will ensure that Shiva information is emailed to the congregation, that someone is available to lead the service, and that prayer books are brought to the services.

### **How to Make a Shiva Call**

It is a mitzvah to make a Shiva call, even if you did not know the deceased or family very well. The presence of the community is of great comfort at a time when mourners may feel isolated and alone in their grief. The custom during the hours of Shiva is to keep the door to the mourner's home unlocked. Visitors should enter without knocking and make their way over to the mourner.

Shiva visits should be kept short; about thirty to forty-five minutes is sufficient. Often people feel unsure about just what to say and how to approach the mourner. Visitors often believe it is their job to lighten the mourner's sadness. This is not the case. There are no words that can remove grief after the loss of a loved one. Jewish tradition actually encourages visitors to remain silent and to wait for the mourner to speak. This allows the mourner to express grief, including tears.

Visitors can provide comfort just by their presence. Sitting with, holding hands, and just listening are often the best things visitors can do. A simple "I'm sorry" or a hug can communicate one's caring and sympathy. Listening, sharing, accepting feelings and offering help as needed are all gifts given by the comforter. In general, it is important not to minimize the loss. Instead, visitors should ask questions that allow the mourner to talk about his or her grief and his/her memories of the deceased. They should accept the mourner's emotions and follow his or her lead in sharing memories and reminiscences. Visitors should not hesitate to share their own stories about the deceased. When making a Shiva visit, it is appropriate to bring a gift of food. It is customary to say to the mourners on your way out, "May you be comforted among all the mourners of Zion."

- **Some Suggestions on Comforting the Mourner**

What you say, or whether you say anything, is less important than the fact that you have made the effort to be with the person who is in grief. Below are some things you might consider saying:

- May you be comforted among the mourners of Jerusalem and Zion.
- May his/her memory be a blessing.
- I wish I had the right words. Just know I care.
- I am here to help in any way I can.
- You and your loved one are in my thoughts and prayers.
- Tell me about the person who died.
- My favorite memory of your loved one is...
- I am always just a phone call away.
- I am usually up early (or I stay up late); call me if you need anything.
- Or, don't say anything – just hug the person and be there for them.

### • **Things You Should Never Say to Someone in Grief**

Some of these statements may sound comforting to you, but they are not. The last thing you want to do is imply that a mourner's pain should be less than it is:

- At least she lived a long life. Many people die young.
- He is in a better place.
- She brought this on herself.
- He wouldn't want you to be sad.
- There is a reason for everything.
- Aren't you over it yet? He has been dead for a while now.
- You can still have another child.
- She was such a good person. God wanted her to be with him.
- I know how you feel.
- She did what she came here to do and it was her time to go.
- Be strong.

(The above are adapted from: <https://connectingdirectors.com/41612-the-11-worst-and-best-things-to-say-to-someone-in-grief>)

### **Care and Concern Committee and Ritual Committee**

Kol Ami will handle the arrangements for one evening of Shiva for the community. The Ritual Committee will handle arrangements with the rabbi or lay leaders for services during one night of Shiva, and will arrange to bring kippot and Shiva minyan booklets to the home. The Care and Concern Committee will organize the congregation in setting up in the home before the evening minyan, cleanup in the home after the evening minyan, and bringing a meal to the mourners themselves.

The evening minyan may be after the funeral service (meal of consolation) or any evening during the Shiva week. If the mourners are sitting Shiva for more than one day, or would like to have additional minyans or meals at their home, they will identify a friend or family member to organize the additional evening(s). The rabbi will share with the community the date and times for any additional services, and the Committees will try to answer any questions the organizers have. If the family prefers not to have a minyan, the Care and Concern Committee can organize

the congregation in bringing a meal to the mourners. The rabbi or coordinator will involve the chairs of the Care and Concern or Ritual Committee as needed.

### Other Shiva Practices

Some of the practices associated with Shiva have significant psychological value, whatever their origin or mystical significance. We encourage you to read about and consider adopting one or more of these rituals, which can also be very comforting as you move from stage to stage in the mourning process.

- **Meal of Consolation:** The end of the funeral service and the beginning of the formal Shiva period of mourning are marked by the *“Seudat Havra’ah”*—the Meal of Consolation. The family and those attending the funeral service return to the home (preferably the home of the deceased or the closest related family member). It is traditional for the friends and family of the mourners to prepare this meal. This is the time to allow your community to take care of you. Food is so basic a sign of life; this first meal reminds the survivors of the need to carry on with their lives, however deep the loss. It is customary to have round foods, such as eggs or chickpeas, to symbolize the cycle of life.
- **Daytime Shiva:** In traditional communities, the practice of Shiva has always included visits during the daytime. Members of the community come and sit with the mourners and allow them to talk and share as they wish. This allows the mourners the opportunity to work through grief in an intimate setting, as different memories arise and the different facets of their relationship with the deceased can be reflected on repeatedly and in greater depth. We encourage mourners to stay home from work and refrain from regular pursuits during the Shiva period. Mourners should feel comfortable inviting friends to spend time with them during the day.
- **Ending Shiva with a Walk and Prayer:** Traditionally, Shiva ends with mourners taking a walk to the end of the block in the company of loved ones, a symbol of leaving the deceased behind and returning to the land of the living. Rabbi Mel Glazer z”l suggested inviting friends to accompany you in this ritual in recognition of the difficulty of this transition.

## 4. The Mourning Process: Kaddish and Beyond

### Saying Kaddish

Following the death of a parent, child, spouse, sibling or close friend, it is customary to recite the Mourner’s Kaddish in the presence of a minyan (10 people) every day for 30 days or, in the case of a parent, for 11 months. Kaddish is also recited on every anniversary (yahrzeit) of the death, and at the four holiday Yizkor services during the year (Passover, Shavuot, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot).

The Kaddish prayer makes no mention of death or mourning; instead it is an affirmation of God’s greatness even in the face of loss, and a reminder that God’s Great Name holds the memories of

all who have ever lived. Saying Kaddish with a minyan goes well beyond the words on the page, however. It encourages the mourner to be part of the ongoing rhythm of Jewish life, to engage with a community of mourners and others on a regular basis, and to designate time to hold the loss of the loved one. Not only symbolically but in practice, the mourner must leave his or her home and join a community of fellows. Over time, saying Kaddish serves as a measure of how the experience of grief changes and softens.

We strongly encourage mourners to come to services to say Kaddish and to allow the community to acknowledge their loss. Although the 11-month period of saying Kaddish is traditionally reserved for parents, we encourage mourners who have suffered the intense loss of a friend or relative other than a parent, to continue saying Kaddish past the 30-day mark if they find it comforting to do so. We also encourage people suffering the loss of a beloved friend or relative, whether Jewish or not, to say Kaddish and partake of this deeply comforting, grounding ritual.

### **Shloshim**

Jewish tradition mandates a gradual set of transitions as one moves through the stages of mourning. After the Shiva and until the end of 30 (shloshim) days from the funeral, it is customary to refrain from parties and entertainment. Some people who were unable to be home during the Shiva period might choose to have a “Shloshim” gathering -- essentially like a Shiva evening -- to mark the 30th day from the funeral and to share reflections of their loved one.

### **Yahrzeit**

The anniversary of the death (yahrzeit) is commemorated each year on the day of the death (not the day of the funeral) with remembrances. At Kol Ami, we commonly use the Hebrew date, which can vary considerably from the secular date; some people commemorate both dates. Traditionally, one would attend services and recite the Mourner’s Kaddish, as well as lighting a yahrzeit candle at home in memory of the loved one’s soul. (The 24-hour candle is lit beginning on the evening before the yahrzeit day). In addition, it is a standard part of Jewish practice to offer tzedakah (charity) as a way to remember and honor the memory of a loved one on his or her yahrzeit. Jewish tradition regards gift giving to others and our community as a holy act. The Yahrzeit candle is also lit on the evening of the last day of Passover, the second day of Shavuot, the last day of Sukkot, and Yom Kippur.

### **Yizkor**

Yizkor services are held four times during the year: on the last day of Passover, the second day of Shavuot, the last day of Sukkot, and on Yom Kippur. Traditionally, those who have lost a parent, sibling, child, or spouse participate in this service, but all are welcome. There is a custom of making a donation to tzedakah in memory of one’s loved one, and as a way of continuing to associate the name of one’s loved one with blessings.

### **Unveiling**

A grave marker (*matzevah* in Hebrew) is customarily erected within the first year after death. In our area, it is customary to hold an unveiling of the monument around the first yahrzeit, but it



may be held any time after Shiva, as it is considered a sign of honor to the deceased. Family, friends, and clergy may be consulted, as appropriate, about the inscription. Rabbi Mel Glazer has written that the time to schedule an unveiling is when the mourner can say, with fullness of heart, the following two statements:

We miss you and we love you.  
We are all right.

There is no set service for the unveiling; typically, it involves a psalm or poem, a few words in remarks, the removal of a cloth covering the monument and reading of the inscription, an El Malei prayer, and Kaddish. This can also be an occasion for the family to share their remembrances. Clergy are not needed to officiate but are available to discuss and plan the unveiling, and to officiate if desired.

### **Grief**

Although Judaism offers a framework for mourning, such as Shiva and shloshim, everyone's grieving process is different. Depending on your relationship with the person who died and other factors, your mourning process is unlikely to fit neatly into pre-defined time frames.

It is not unusual for a mourner to think his or her life is getting back to normal, only to have a sight, sound, smell, or other trigger suddenly bring back strong feelings of loss and pain. Just because a *yahrzeit* has occurred doesn't mean the grieving process is over.

There is no right time to "get over" the loss of a close relative or friend. Unfortunately, our society often pushes people to cut short the grieving process or to mask the ups and downs of one's mourning. Jewish tradition takes a different approach. It is through experiencing loss directly and grieving it fully that the healing process is able to function. And through a series of milestones -- Shiva, shloshim, and *yahrzeit* -- the mourner is gently encouraged to return to regular life.

Nevertheless, there are losses that are so intense, or accompanied by so many additional issues, that mourners can feel stuck in intense grief for a long time afterwards. Some families also suffer conflict during the last weeks or months of a parent's life over treatment and end-of-life issues, and/or subsequently over the inheritance. If you are experiencing these difficulties and the impact is ongoing, or if the grief does not seem to be lessening, please contact the rabbi to discuss, and allow us to recommend bereavement counselors who can help you move forward through this difficult time.

## **III. RESOURCES**

### **1. Vidui / Final Confessional Prayer**

Traditional Judaism offers a confessional prayer, or vidui, to be recited during a time of serious illness or near death. It can be recited by the patient or by a friend, family member, or chaplain on behalf of a person who is very ill, especially when life and death are hanging in the balance. Here are three alternatives.

### **A. Prayer in a Time of Serious Illness**

Rabbi Gilah Langner

Our God and God of our ancestors, we acknowledge that all of life is in Your hands.

We pray for healing for this beloved (man/woman/person).

May (he/she/they) be filled and embraced by a complete and healing love and forgiveness.

May (he/she/they) always know how precious (his/her/their) life is to those who love (him/her/them).

Protect (his/her/their) beloved family: \_\_\_\_\_.

Their souls are woven together for all time.

Grant hope and strength to (his/her/their) family and caregivers, guiding their hands and hearts and decisions with wisdom, loving care, and skill.

*Ki malachav yetzaveh lach, lishmorcha b'chol d'racheh-cha.*

May angels be appointed for (him/her/their), to guard (him/her/their) on all (his/her/their) paths.

In Your hand lies (his/her/their) spirit.

In Your Great Name, You hold the life and memories of each soul on earth.

You redeem us, Adonai, God of Truth.

Shma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad.

Hear O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.

### **B. Traditional Vidui from *A Time to Prepare*, revised edition, pp. 49–50**

My God and God of all who have gone before me, Author of life and death, I turn to You in trust. Although I pray for life and health, I know that I am mortal. If my life must soon come to an end, let me die, I pray; at peace. If only my hands were clean and my heart pure! I confess that I have committed sins and left much undone, yet I know also the good that I did or tried to do. May my acts of goodness give meaning to my life, and may my errors be forgiven.

Protector of the bereaved and the helpless, watch over my loved ones. Into Your hand I commit my spirit. Redeem it, O God of mercy and truth.

*Adonai melech, Adonai malach, Adonai yimloch l'olam va-ed.* God reigns; God has reigned; God will reign for ever and ever.

*Baruch shem kvod malchuto l'olam va-ed.* Blessed be God's name whose glorious dominion is for ever and ever.

*Adonai Hu Ha Elohim.* Adonai is God.

*Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad.* Hear, O Israel: Adonai is our God, Adonai is One.

(Those who are present repeat)

*Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad.* Hear, O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One.

After the moment of death:

*Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu melech ha-olam, dayan ha-emet.* Blessed is the Eternal our God, Sovereign of the Universe, the Righteous Judge.

*Adonai natan, vadonai lakach, y'hi shem Adonai m'vo-rach.* God has given and God has taken away. Blessed be the name of God.

### **3. Alternative Vidui by Rabbi Rami Shapiro**

I acknowledge before the Source of all That life and death are not in my hands.  
Just as I did not choose to be born, so I do not choose to die.

May it come to pass that I may be healed but if death is my fate, then I accept it with dignity and the loving calm of one who knows the way of all things.

May my death be honorable, and may my life be a healing memory for those who know me. May my loved ones think well of me and may my memory bring them joy.

From all those I may have hurt, I ask forgiveness. Upon all who have hurt me, I bestow forgiveness.

As a wave returns to the ocean,  
So I return to the Source from which I came.  
*Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad.*  
Hear O Israel, that which we call God is Oneness itself.

Blessed is the Way of God  
The Way of Life and Death,  
of coming and going,  
of meeting and loving,  
now and forever.  
As I was blessed with the one,  
So now am I blessed with the other.  
Shalom. Shalom. Shalom.

## **2. Supplemental Prayers and Readings**

### **When I Die (adapted from Merrit Malloy)**

When I die give what is left of me away  
to children and old men that wait to die.  
And if you need to cry,  
cry for your brother walking the street beside you.  
And when you need me, put your arms around anyone  
and give them what you need to give me.

I want to leave you something,  
something better than words or sounds.  
Look for me in the people I've known or loved,  
and if you cannot give me away,  
at least let me live in your eyes and not in your mind.

You can love me best by letting hands touch hands,  
and by letting go of children that need to be free.  
Love doesn't die, people do.  
So, when all that's left of me is love,  
give me away.

### **A Man in His Life (by Yehuda Amichai)**

A man doesn't have time in his life  
to have time for everything.  
He doesn't have seasons enough to have  
a season for every purpose. Ecclesiastes  
Was wrong about that.

A man needs to love and to hate at the same moment,  
to laugh and cry with the same eyes,  
with the same hands to throw stones and to gather them,  
to make love in war and war in love.  
And to hate and forgive and remember and forget,  
to arrange and confuse, to eat and to digest  
what history  
takes years and years to do.

A man doesn't have time.  
When he loses he seeks, when he finds  
he forgets, when he forgets he loves, when he loves  
he begins to forget.

And his soul is seasoned, his soul  
is very professional.

Only his body remains forever  
an amateur. It tries and it misses,  
gets muddled, doesn't learn a thing,  
drunk and blind in its pleasures  
and its pains.

He will die as figs die in autumn,  
Shriveled and full of himself and sweet,  
the leaves growing dry on the ground,  
the bare branches pointing to the place  
where there's time for everything.

### **In Many Houses** (author unknown)

In many houses  
all at once  
I see my mother and father  
and they are young  
as they walk in.

Why should my  
tears come,  
to see them laughing?

That they cannot  
see me  
is of no matter:

I was once  
their dream:  
now  
they are mine.

### **We Remember Them** (by Roland B. Gittelsohn; adapted by Sylvia Kamens and Jack Riemer)

In the rising of the sun and in its going down, we remember them.  
In the blowing of the wind and in the chill of winter, we remember them.  
In the opening of buds and in the rebirth of spring, we remember them.  
In the blueness of the sky and in the warmth of summer, we remember them.  
In the rustling of leaves and in the beauty of autumn, we remember them.  
In the beginning of the year and when it ends, we remember them.  
When we are weary and in need of strength, we remember them.  
When we are lost and sick at heart, we remember them.  
When we have joys we yearn to share, we remember them.  
So long as we live, they too shall live, for they are now a part of us, as  
we remember them.

## **Stars Up Above** (by Hannah Senesh)

There are stars up above,  
so far away we only see their light  
long, long after the star itself is gone.  
And so it is with people that we loved –  
their memories keep shining ever brightly  
though their time with us is done.  
But the stars that light up the darkest night,  
these are the lights that guide us.  
As we live our days, these are the ways we remember.

## **3. Books**

This list includes both Jewish and secular perspectives. It is drawn from a selection of titles by Susan Freiband, retired librarian and Kol Ami member.

Brayne, Sue. ***The D Word: Talking about Dying, A Guide for Relatives, Friends and Carers.*** London/New York: Continuum, 2010. 172p.

A practical guide, offering advice and resources; better ways of talking openly and honestly about death. Includes stories, things to think about, what can help, recommended reading, and helpful contacts.

Brenner, Anne. ***Mourning and Mitzvah, A Guide Journal for Walking the Mourner's Path through Grief to Healing.*** Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993. 248p.

Workbook style, including guided exercises in each chapter. Divided into three parts following the mourning process: contraction, breaking of vessels and tikkun (healing). Includes glossary and bibliography.

Cooper, Rabbi David. ***God Is a Verb: Kabbalah and the Practice of Mystical Judaism.*** New York: Riverhead Books, 1998. 333p.

An authority on mystical Judaism and Kabbalah explains the 5 levels of the soul as described in the Zohar, concepts that have absorbed and consoled Jews over the centuries.

Diamant, Anita. ***Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead and Mourn as a Jew.*** New York: Schocken Books, 1998. 266p.

Broad scope, covering why we say kaddish, respect for the dying and for the dead, compassion for the bereaved (including shiva). Appendix with information about writing a will, health care directives; glossary, notes and bibliography.

Garrett, Stephen Lloyd. ***When Death Speaks, Listen, Learn, and Love***. Victoria, Canada: Friesen Press, 2013. 151p.

Discussion about perspectives and different ways to talk about death, preparing for death, legacy, suicide, kids and death.

Gillman, Neil. ***The Death of Death: Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought***. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997. 324p.

Traces the development of Jewish thought through the centuries concerning bodily resurrection and spiritual immortality. Suggests that Judaism actually pays a great deal of thought to the afterlife.

Hickman, Martha. ***Healing After Loss: Daily Meditations for Working Through Grief***. New York: William Morrow, 1994. 384p.

A classic guide for dealing with grief and loss. Thoughtful words to strengthen, inspire and comfort.

James, John W. and Friedman, Russell. ***The Grief Recovery Handbook: The Action Program for Moving beyond Death, Divorce and Other Losses***. New York: Harper Collins 1998. 173p.

Presents concepts of grief recovery to help deal with loss. Focus is on recovery from emotional pain caused by death, divorce and other losses.

Kolatch, Alfred J. ***The Jewish Mourner's Book of Why***. New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1993. 412p.

Explains from the traditional (Orthodox) perspective Jewish laws, observances, customs, ceremonies and traditions related to death and mourning. Uses a questions and answer format. Includes readings for the bereaved and appendices (Kaddish, Unveiling Service, Home Yizkor Memorial Service, Family Yahrzeit Record).

Kubler-Ross, Elizabeth. ***On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy and Their Own Families***. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1969. 286p.

Describes how we learn from the dying about anxieties, fears, hopes of the final stages of life. Includes stories of patients; fear of death, attitudes toward death and dying, five stages of death. A classic work from an internationally renowned leader in the field.

Lamm, Maurice. ***The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning***. Middle Village, New York: Jonathan David Publishing, 2000. 318p.

Classic work in this field, first published in 1969. Describes the Jewish approach from the moment of death to the funeral service and internment, mourning observances (Shiva and Sheloshim), yearlong observances, and post mourning.

Levy, Naomi. ***To Begin Again. The Journey Toward Comfort, Strength, and Faith in Difficult Times***. New York: Ballantine Publishing, 1998. 288p.

The author was just fifteen when her father was murdered. From her struggles with grief, anger, and depression, she forged wisdom that enabled her to become a rabbi and write this book revolving around honesty, recovery, and compassion. Meant to help sorrowing and bewildering hearts heal.

Levine, Stephen. ***Unattended Sorrow: Recovering from Loss and Reviving the Heart***. Emmaus, PA: Rodale, 2005. 225p.

Explores the long-range impact of unresolved sorrow. Aims to help process grief in whatever way it manifests. Explains how confronting sorrows endured with mercy and self-acceptance heals the heart.

Levine, Stephen. ***Who Dies? An Investigation of Conscious Living and Conscious Dying***. New York: Doubleday, 1982. 317p.

Covers many aspects of the dying process, weaving years of spiritual practice and sharing with patients from workshops and retreats. The author is a poet and longtime practitioner of Buddhist meditation. Includes appendices: Dying at home, Skandha meditation and Tibetan Bardo System; music and book list.

Light, Richard A. ***Jewish Rites of Death, Stories of Beauty and Transformation***. Photography by Thea Rose Light. Santa Fe, NM: Terra Nova Books, 2016. 142p.

Described as “a gateway into the whole world of Jewish spiritual living.” Contains testimonies of people transformed by shmirah and taharah, guarding and purification taking place when a person dies. Includes practical considerations, poems and photographs, glossary, sources of more information.

Morris, Virginia. ***Talking about Death Won't Kill You***. New York: Workman Publishing, 2001. 294p.

Explores the experience of death, how people die, their options, obstacles they face. Offers suggestions about how to think and talk about death, preparing for death. Includes many personal stories. Written by a journalist specializing in health and medical issues.

Ostaseski, Frank. ***The Five Intentions: Discovering what Death Can Teach Us about Living Fully***. New York: Flatiron Books, 2017. 290p

Presents lessons about the meaning of life and how a conscious awareness of death brings us closer to our truer selves. Written by a Buddhist teacher, co-founder of the Zen Hospice Project, a leading voice in contemplative end-of-life-care.

Raphael, Rabbi Simcha Paull Rafael ***The Grief Journey and the Afterlife: Jewish Pastoral Care for Bereavement***. Boulder, CO: Albion-Andalus, 2015. 108p.



Presents a model of the grieving journey, interconnecting contemporary psychology of grief, traditional Jewish death rituals and Jewish understanding of the afterlife. Describes how this helps mourners through the process of bereavement and healing.

Reimer, Jack, ed. ***Jewish Reflections on Death***. New York: Schocken Books, 1976. 182p.

An anthology, introduced by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and with contributions by scholars including Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Jacob Neusner, and Elie Wiesel. Some of the chapters are memoirs, others are issue-oriented, all aim to provide insight and comfort.

Rierner, Jack, ed. ***Wrestling with Angels: Jewish Insights on Death and Mourning***. New York: Schocken Books, 1995. 374p.

A compilation of experiences and insights about Jewish rituals of mourning and healing. Introduces and explains traditional Jewish practices, customs and rituals related to death and mourning. Personal reflections provide guidance, hope and support for those experiencing loss.

Sonsino, Rifat and Daniel B. Syme. ***What Happens After I Die? Jewish Views of Life After Death***. New York: UAHC Press, 1990. 147p.

Offers a wide spectrum of Jewish responses to the question of life after death. Classical answers are drawn from traditional Jewish literature. Modern Jewish thinkers, from all denominations in the Jewish community, add their personal notions of life after death.

Spitz, Rabbi Elie Kaplan. ***Does the Soul Survive? A Jewish Journey to Belief in Afterlife, Past Lives and Living with a Purpose***. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000. 245p.

A memoir of how the author moved from skeptic to believer in the reality of the soul. Through transformative stories, describes the soul's journey; examines Judaism's traditional perspectives on the soul and its survival. Includes appendix, "Torah and Immortality of the Soul."

Wanzer, Sidney & Glenmullen, Joseph. ***To Die Well: Your Right to Comfort, Calm, and Choice in the Last Days of Life***. Philadelphia, PA: Perseus Books Group/Da Capo Press, 2007. 207p.

Written by two doctors based on their experiences with patients. Explores ways in which patients and families can work with physicians to maintain control over the manner of dying. Addresses rights of the dying and end of life decisions.

Winkler, Rabbi Gershon. ***The Soul of the Matter***. New York: Judaica Press, 1992. 85p.

This slim book explores the farthest of Jewish mysticism and the occult. Topics include the anatomy of the soul, infant mortality, reincarnation and transmigration, apparitions and the "spiritual body." A fusion of folklore, Midrash, and parapsychology for those interested in conceptions of the afterlife.

Wolfson, Ron. ***A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort***. New York: Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs and the University of Judaism, 1993. 315p.

Covers the art of Jewish mourning and comforting, including facing death, death in the family, art of Jewish mourning, from death to the funeral, the funeral, Shiva, shloshim to yizkor, how to prepare for your own death, afterlife. Practical, “how to” emphasis, aimed at both mourners and comforters. Appendices include estate instructions.

#### **4. Online Resources**

A wealth of information is available online on all the topics covered in this guidebook. We particularly recommend the following websites:

[Kavod v’Nichum: Jewish Funerals, Burial, and Mourning](#)

[JADE: Jewish Association for Death Education](#)