



Judaism and Bereavement

"המקום ינחם אתכם בתוך שאר אבלי ציון וירושלים"

"Hamakom yenakhem etekhem betokh shaar avelay tziyon viyrushalayim."

"May the Omnipresent comfort you among the rest of the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem."

The Good Thinking team has worked with the Jewish community, including Rabbi Eryn London and Rabbi Stanley Coten, to produce this short guide about bereavement.

It aims to help Londoners who identify as Jewish but who are not connected to the Jewish community as well as members of the Jewish community in London who are not aware of the support available when someone dies.

In addition, this guide should help health and care professionals who are supporting terminally ill patients of the Jewish faith.

Contents

4 Before someone dies

6 Practicalities

7 Rituals, such as Psalms and prayers

8 After someone dies

9 Advice for health and care professionals

12 Rituals, including *Tahara*, *Shiva* and *Shloshim*

16 Bereavement support and resources

Before someone dies



It is important to ascertain, where possible, what people want when it comes to the role of Judaism in their death. As a relative, friend or carer, you could:

- Find out 'what matters most' to someone important to you.
- Think ahead and make an Advanced Care Plan – this anticipatory plan is not set in stone and can be recorded, shared and regularly reviewed.
- Try to understand (both through the person and their family members or friends) what arrangements are in place and what they would like.
- If you and/or your family keep Shabbat, it is important that forward planning is included in the care plan. Directions should be clear and there should be instructions in place so that the staff have guidance on what to do in the worst case scenario.

If you can see the end is near for someone, try to stay with them. It will give them comfort to know they are not alone.

Practicalities

There are various practical considerations for the death and the burial, including:

- Family members and/or the person who is dying may wish to be in touch with their Rabbi or community shortly before their death. People who are members of synagogues may also be members of a burial society. This will allow for the necessary arrangements to be made swiftly.
- If your/their synagogue membership has lapsed (perhaps due to worry over the costs of regular payments) or you/they have never been a member of a synagogue, you/they may have other funeral plans.
- If the person who is dying has not made provision for funeral costs and no one else can fund the burial, and the family can evidence they are on state benefits, some Jewish burial societies will accept (or consider) applications for a grant.

If the person who is dying is not part of a synagogue and they want a Jewish burial, it is important to contact a Jewish burial society (find out more on the [Jewish Visiting](#) website).

Rituals

When someone is dying and after their death, certain rituals take place. These may include:

- Reciting or reading Psalms or other prayers at the sick bed. This can be done by the person who is dying or by a family member, friend, Rabbi, Chaplain or someone else.
- Taking the opportunity to say goodbye to the important people in their life, such as family and friends. As part of this, the person who is dying may ask for forgiveness for any wrongs or hurt they might have caused.
- Saying the *Vidui* or confession prayer or the *Shema* prayer, a declaration of faith in God (you can find the traditional text of final prayers and declarations [here](#)). If saying the *Vidui* prayer distresses the patient, remind them that many have said the prayer and have gone on to recover.

After someone dies



Advice for health and care professionals

Nursing staff in a hospital or pastoral staff in a care setting should do the following:

- Once death occurs, a Rabbi should be contacted as soon as possible (if this is what the deceased wanted) to begin the process of a traditional Jewish burial.
- If the patient has no personal Rabbi or Minister, the Jewish Chaplain designated for your hospital or care home should be contacted. The switchboard or the Chaplain's Office should have their contact details.
- In the Jewish religion, funerals should take place as soon as possible after death. Please keep this in mind. You can find more details about funerals later in this guide.

If the services of a Jewish Chaplain are urgently required and you are unable to contact a Jewish Chaplain, please contact the **Jewish Visiting** office during office hours or call the Senior Hospital Chaplain's mobile outside of office hours. Every effort will be made to secure the services of another Chaplain. The Jewish Hospital Visiting Service and the Senior Rabbi will not usually be available on the Sabbath or on Jewish holidays.

If it is not possible to get hold of a Jewish Chaplain (especially if it is on a Sabbath or during a major festival), hospital and care home staff are permitted to carry out the following procedures immediately without a Minister being present:

- The eyes should be closed, as should the mouth.
- The body should be laid flat with hands open, arms parallel and close to the body and legs stretched out straight. The greatest respect that can be shown towards the deceased is to do nothing further, apart from cleansing orifices only to the extent required to preserve human dignity.
- Jewellery should be removed in the presence of witnesses and a list of items made, then the jewellery should be given to the family.
- All external catheters and medical equipment attached to the body should be removed and all incisions dressed. There is no need to remove any identification bracelets.
- After the body has been removed to the appropriate burial society and immediately prior to the funeral, a ritual wash (Tahara) will be carried out. The body will then be wrapped in simple shrouds and covered with a plain sheet (and, for men, a Tallit).

There is a Jewish tradition that the body should not be left unattended after death. Relatives and friends should keep vigil by the body and recite prayers.

It is understood that this may not always be permissible in a hospital environment but, if requested and where possible, arrangements should be made for the family to sit in a viewing room.

You may need to encourage the family or any lasting power of attorney/next of kin to contact their Rabbi or synagogue for guidance, if that is what the deceased wanted.

It may also be helpful for nursing and pastoral staff to know the following:

- Some Jewish people will not use the phone on Shabbat (Friday night to Saturday night) or Jewish holidays and will not make the call until after the Sabbath or holiday. Some will make prior arrangements for 'worst case scenario' so the hospital staff will know what to do.
- In the Jewish religion, funerals should take place as soon as possible after death. Families may encourage staff to expedite the signing of the death certificate and transmission to the relevant registrar. If there are delays, you can encourage families to contact a Jewish burial society that has experience in expediting the process. In most circumstances, Jewish burial societies are not permitted to remove the deceased from the hospital until the death has been registered.

Rituals

Jewish rituals for the deceased include:

Tahara

Tahara means ritual purification. This is a special way to cleanse and dress the body in simple shrouds before burial, wrapping a male in his own Tallit where available. This is traditionally done by the Chevra Kadisha, the Holy Group, who are specially trained volunteers in this ritual practice.

Shmira (Guarding)

In the Jewish religion, there is a custom of not leaving the body alone. Family and community members sit with or near the deceased until burial, reciting psalms. Within a hospital environment, *Shmira* is not always possible, as health and safety protocols require the deceased to be taken from the ward to the safety of the mortuary within a designated time period in order to afford the deceased greater dignity.

Burial

The Jewish burial society will provide guidance on the burial but the following information might be helpful:

- In many Jewish communities, burial will take place as soon as possible. Some people might wait until family is able to arrive.
- Before the burial, many mourners will do *kriya*. This is the tearing of the garment the mourners are wearing to represent the pain they are feeling.
- The Rabbi or person presiding over the funeral may give a eulogy. If a family member wishes to deliver a eulogy, some burial societies allow this.

- The coffin will be lowered into the grave and a few prayers will be said. This will be the first time that the family will say the Mourner's Kaddish.
- In many communities, the family will begin to put earth into the grave. They will do this with a backwards shovel, which represents not wanting to fill the grave quickly. Sometimes, earth from Israel is available to be put in the ground along with the coffin.
- In many communities, those attending the funeral will form two rows and the mourners will walk between them (this generally happens when there is a really large crowd and it would take too long for the mourners to respond to each person attending). It is now that those attending will say words of comfort. In some communities, the traditional phrase of comfort is:

"הַמָּקוֹם יְנַחֵם אֶתְכֶם בְּתוֹךְ שָׂאֵר אַבְלֵי צִיּוֹן וִירוּשָׁלַיִם"

"Hamakom yenakhem etekhem betokh shaar avelay tziyon viyrushalayim."

"May the Omnipresent comfort you among the rest of the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem."

Shiva

Shiva literally means "seven" and is the first seven days of mourning for the immediate family members of the deceased. The Shiva begins immediately after the burial and lasts for seven days.

Some immediate family members have the custom of:

- Not wearing leather shoes
- Sitting on low chairs (provided by the synagogue)

- Not getting their hair cut or, for men, not shaving facial hair
- Not buying or wearing new clothing
- Lighting a seven-day candle
- Covering mirrors
- Not wearing make-up or perfume
- During Shiva, many people will open their homes (they can choose the hours) to allow for community members to come and pay their respects.
- In many communities, the weekday prayer services will take place at the Shiva house.
- A carer (e.g. from a care home or a home carer) may wish to and are often very welcome to attend the Shiva.
- On the seventh day, the family members get up from their low chairs and walk around the block marking that they have ended the Shiva period.

Shloshim

Shloshim literally means 30. For those mourning a spouse, sibling or child, this will be the main time period of mourning.

During this time, the mourners will say the Mourner's Kaddish during synagogue services.

Some people have the custom of:

- Not buying new things
- Not attending parties or concerts
- Not getting their hair cut or, for men, not shaving facial hair

For those who are mourning the loss of a parent, the mourning rituals of the Shloshim will take place over 11 months. If you need a haircut or new objects in that time, please seek advice from your Rabbi.

Anniversary of the death

In Ashkenazi communities, the anniversary of the death is called a *Yahrzeit*. In Sephardi communities, it is known as *nahala* or *meldado*. It is marked yearly and many people will:

- Light a Yahrzeit candle (a candle that lasts 24 hours)
- Make a point to go to synagogue that day or the Shabbat proceeding to say Kaddish
- Give *tzedaka* (charity in the honour of the deceased)
- Visit the grave and place a small stone on it signifying they have visited
- Study some rabbinic teachings like sections from the Mishna

Around one year after the burial or earlier, many people will have a stone setting or an unveiling, when the tombstone is put in place. Many will have a small ceremony at the grave site. There is an additional cost to purchase the grave stone on top of the burial costs.

On Yom Kippur, Shmini Atzeret, Pesach and Shavuot, the *Yizkor* memorial prayer is said. Many people make a point to be in synagogue on one or all of these days to say the memorial prayers.

Bereavement support and resources

If you are a member of a Jewish community, you may receive support from within that community and they may be able to recommend further support. There are also a number of organisations that specialise in bereavement support within the Jewish community, including:

Jewish Bereavement Counselling Service

0208 951 3881

enquiries@jbcs.org.uk

www.jbcs.org.uk

Ahada Bereavement Counselling (Redbridge and surrounding areas)

07758 727328

<https://find.redbridge.gov.uk/kb5/redbridge/fsd/service.page?id=Q4TR-SkPrGE>

Raphael – The Jewish Counselling Service

0800 234 6236

info@raphaeljewishcounselling.org

<https://www.raphaeljewishcounselling.org>

Chai Cancer Care

0808 808 4467 or 020 8202 2211

info@chaicancercare.org

<https://chaicancercare.org>

Barnet Bereavement Service (advice for all faiths)

020 3759 4347

Barnetbereavement@tiscali.co.uk

<https://www.barnet.gov.uk/directories/support-organisations/barnet-bereavement-service>

If you or someone you know experiences complex or complicated grief (where you struggle to cope with the death of your loved one many months later and your grief leads to anxiety, depression, loneliness and other emotions), additional support is available from organisations such as [Jami](#), the Jewish community's mental health service.

If you need urgent support, Jami recommends the following options:

- Call your GP or out of hours service for an emergency appointment
- Contact your Community Mental Health Team (CMHT) if you have one
- Call Samaritans on **116 123** (24/7) or the Jewish Helpline on **0800 652 9249** (Sunday – Thursday 12:00 – 00:00; Friday 12:00 – 15:00)
- Text **SHOUT** or **Jami** to **85258**
- If you are under 35 and worried about how you are feeling or if you are worried about a young person, call **HOPELINEUK** (Papyrus) on **0800 068 41 41** or text **07860 039 967**
- Go to your nearest Accident and Emergency (A&E) department
- Call **999** in an emergency or NHS Direct on **111**

Bereavement support organisations for all faiths

[At a loss](#) (directory of services)

[Cruse](#)

[Sudden](#)

[The Good Grief Trust](#)

Useful bereavement resources for health and care professionals

[Good Thinking](#) (How to provide culturally sensitive bereavement support: A guide for practitioners)

[NHS](#) (Understanding different bereavement practices and how our colleagues may experience grief)

[Sudden](#) (Cultural and religious issues professionals may encounter following a bereavement)

Useful Good Thinking bereavement resources for all faiths

[How to cope with bereavement and grief](#) (advice for adults)

[How to cope with the death of a loved one](#) (advice for young people)

[How to support someone who has lost a loved one](#) (advice for relatives and friends)

Contact a Rabbi

If you are not affiliated to a Jewish community and would like to contact a Rabbi, you can find contact information for various Jewish denominations below:

[Federation](#)

[Liberal Judaism](#)

[Masorti Judaism](#)

[Reform Judaism](#)

[The S&P Sephardi Community](#)

[United Synagogue](#)

References

[A Brief Guide to Bereavement – United Synagogue](#)

[Kavod-Va'Nichum](#)

[Jewish Ritual, Reality and Response at the End of Life](#)

[Jewish Principles of Care for the Dying](#)

[Jewish Bereavement Counselling Service](#)

[Jami](#)

About us

Good Thinking is supported by the NHS and London borough councils. We provide free, 24/7, digital support to Londoners seeking mental health advice and help regardless of where they are on their journey. We offer round-the-clock support and self-care options that are easy to access and simple to navigate.

Our mission

We support individuals to look after their mental wellbeing in a way that works best for them. We encourage everyone to be proactive about their mental health and we provide tools and guidance to support this.

London Bereavement Support Programme

This resource has been funded and supported by the Mayor of London under the remit of the [Mental Health and Wellbeing Recovery Mission](#), which is being led by Thrive LDN. The mission aims to build a coalition of wellbeing champions and empower Londoners to act to improve their own and their communities' wellbeing. For more information, visit the [Thrive LDN website](#).

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