

Guide to Jewish Death and Mourning Customs in Western North Carolina

*This document was created under the auspices of the Jewish Leadership
Collaborative of Western North Carolina*

*The most current version can be found on JCWNC.ORG
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Contents

Summary	3
Preparing for Death.....	4
<i>Vidui</i>—Confessional	4
By the individual.....	4
Read by another if individual is unable:.....	5
When A Death Occurs	6
Making Funeral Arrangements	7
The Cemetery	7
<i>Chevra Kadisha</i> – Preparing the deceased for burial	8
<i>Tahara</i> – Washing the deceased.....	9
<i>Shomrim</i> – Guarding the deceased	9
Pallbearers	10
The Funeral	11
The Burial	12
Following the Burial.....	13
<i>Shiva</i> - The First Period of Mourning.....	14
<i>Shloshim</i> - The Second Period of Mourning	14
Yahrzeit	15
Unveiling/Dedication of the Marker	15
Visiting the Grave.....	15
Contact Information for Area Rabbis	16

Summary

The creation of this *Guide to Jewish Death and Mourning Customs* was spearheaded by the Jewish Leadership Collaborative of Western North Carolina (JLCWNC) in conjunction with members of the Asheville *Chevra Kadisha*, Congregation Beth Israel, Congregation Beth HaTephila, and Chabad of Asheville. Professional guidance was generously provided by Rabbi Wolff Alterman, Rabbi Justin Goldstein, Rabbi Batsheva Meiri, and Rabbi Shaya Susskind.

This guide is an attempt to provide members of the Western North Carolina Jewish community with helpful resources and practical information for everything from planning a funeral and preparing your home for *shiva* to creating a headstone. The Jewish way of dealing with death is one part of a larger philosophy of life in which all persons are viewed with dignity and respect. Judaism teaches that the human body retains its sanctity even after death because it once held a sacred human life. Our sages compare the sacredness of a body to an impaired Torah scroll. Although no longer usable, it still retains its holiness. Every individual is sacred in life and death, and we care for the deceased in a way that maintains their dignity and honor. As we are all born, we all die. Jewish burial traditions seek to show our equality through practices such as burial in simple shrouds and a plain wood casket, though some ecological burials dispense with the casket (see <https://carolinamemorialsanctuary.org/> for additional information on “green burials”).

When a member of our community dies, volunteers in our community make every effort to lovingly assist the family of the deceased. In this spirit, this guide was prepared to help families when they suffer a loss. It is our goal that every mourner feels the comfort and support of their community.

Preparing for Death

This guide is focused on Jewish death and mourning customs and is not intended to address the sometimes very difficult medical, ethical, and other issues associated with the end of life. Should you need any assistance in this regard, please contact your rabbi. It is recommended that you designate a healthcare agent to make medical decisions on your behalf, that you create a living will, and that you make family members aware of your general desires regarding your medical treatment and burial procedures.

***Vidui*—Confessional**

When a person is nearing the end of his/her life, Jewish tradition provides an opportunity for spiritual guidance, comfort, and fulfillment. It has become a powerful custom for someone to recite the *Shema* when they feel their life is ebbing away. There is also an ancient custom of reciting the *Vidui*, or confessional.

While we are more familiar with confessionals as part of the Yom Kippur liturgy, the deathbed confessional gives those who are dying an opportunity to spiritually cleanse themselves and approach death without reservation.

If someone is unable to recite the prayers, there is a version of the *vidui* that can be said on the dying person's behalf. Below is the English translation of both forms of the *vidui*.

By the individual:

My God and God of my ancestors, accept my prayer. Do not ignore my supplication. Forgive me for all the sins which I have committed in my lifetime. I am abashed and ashamed of these deeds I have committed. Please accept my pain and suffering as atonement and forgive my wrongdoing, for against You alone have I sinned. May it be Your will, *Adonai* my God and God of my ancestors, that I sin no more. With Your great mercy, cleanse me of my sins, but not through suffering and disease. Send a perfect healing to me and to all who are stricken.

I acknowledge to You, *Adonai* my God and God of my ancestors, that my life and recovery depend on You. May it be Your will to heal me. Yet, if You have decreed that I shall die of this affliction, may my death atone for all sins and transgressions which I have committed before You. Shelter me in the shadow of Your wings. Grant me a share in the world to come.

Protector of orphans and Guardian of spouses left behind, protect my beloved family, with whose soul my own soul is bound. Into Your hand I commit my soul. You have redeemed me, *Adonai*, God of truth.

Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad.

Adonai Hu haElohim. Adonai Hu haElohim.

Hear, O Israel: *Adonai* is Our God, *Adonai* is One. *Adonai* is God. *Adonai* is God.

Read by another if individual is unable:

Adonai, our God and God of our ancestors, we acknowledge that our life is in Your hands. May it be Your will that You send perfect healing to (name of infirmed). Yet, if it is Your final decree that s/he/they be taken by death, let it be in love. May her/his death atone for the sins and transgressions which s/he committed before You. Grant her/him a portion of the abundant good which is held in store for the righteous and give her/him life replete with joy in Your presence, at Your right hand forever. Protector of orphans and Guardian of spouses left behind, protect her/his beloved family, with whose soul her/his own soul is bound. Into Your hand s/he commits her/his soul. You have redeemed her/him, *Adonai*, God of truth.

Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad.

Baruch shem kivod malchuto l'olam vaed.

Adonai Hu haElohim. Adonai Hu haElohim.

Hear, O Israel: *Adonai* is Our God, *Adonai* is One.

Praised be God's glory for ever and ever.

Adonai is God. *Adonai* is God.

For an alternative *vidui* prayers, see the following link:

<https://velveteenrabbi.blogs.com/blog/2013/12/before-departing.html>

When a Death Occurs

When your loved one has died, and you want to plan his/her care and burial, a member of the family should contact the funeral home as soon as possible after the death occurs. The assistance of the *WNC Chevra Kadisha* (a group of volunteers dedicated to honoring the dead according to the dictates of Jewish Law, and to honoring the living according to the dictates of our humanity) is made at the invitation of the family and communicated by the family to the staff of the funeral home. This can be done in two ways:

1) The family contacts the funeral home for pre-planning purposes (preferable). The family will be asked by the staff if they would like to have the services of the *Chevra Kadisha* and, if so, do they want *Tahara* (ritual bathing and dressing of the body) and *Shmira* (sitting near the body). These may be available together or stand alone. This will be noted in the record, and when the services are needed, the staff will contact those who organize the services. It is only through the notification of the staff of the funeral home, following the request of the family, that the process will begin.

2) The family contacts the funeral home at the time of death. They will be asked by the staff if they would like to have the services of the *WNC Chevra Kadisha* and, if so, do they want *Tahara* and *Shmira*. At this request, the staff member will contact those who organize the services to begin the process. It is only through the notification of the staff of the funeral home, following the request of the family, that the process will begin.

Local funeral homes that are used by our community and with whom we have arranged to provide *tahara* and *sh'mira* are:

- Groce Funeral Home and Cremation Service, 1401 Patton Avenue, Asheville, NC 28806, (828) 252-3535
- Morris Funeral Home, 304 Merrimon Ave, Asheville, NC 28801, (828) 252-1821

A member of the family should also contact a rabbi who will offer assistance concerning traditional Jewish practices, scheduling, and will help to notify those members of the synagogue as discussed below who will be involved so that the family can be assisted and supported through the funeral and mourning period. The rabbi can be the rabbi of the

congregation where the deceased or his/her family are members or a rabbi that had a relationship with the deceased or his/her family. For non-affiliated individuals, it is recommended that the family contact Rabbi Wolff Alterman or Rabbi Shaya Susskind. Contact information can be found in the back of this pamphlet

If a loved one dies on *Shabbat*, you may contact the rabbi, and you may also wish to contact the funeral home to remove the deceased (the *meit/meitah*). It is inappropriate, however, to make funeral arrangements on *Shabbat*. After the end of Shabbat, the rabbis will respond to your contact.

Making Funeral Arrangements

Jewish law requires that burial take place as quickly as possible, usually within 24 hours of death if possible. Tradition calls for a simple wooden casket, made without metal parts. This is something the family will decide upon privately. Burial may be delayed for legal reasons, to transport the deceased, to enable close relatives to travel long distances to be present at the funeral/burial, or to avoid burial on *Shabbat* or a holy day. The family, rabbi, and funeral home should all concur in the final funeral arrangements.

The Cemetery

Determining where the deceased will be buried is a critical decision that must be made while discussing funeral arrangements with the rabbi and the funeral home. Lou Pollock Cemetery is the only *Jewish* cemetery in Asheville, and any Jewish person can be buried there. There is a section at Lou Pollock to accommodate Jewish individuals and their non-Jewish spouses. Cremated individuals can also be buried at this cemetery. Congregation Beth Israel (CBI) manages and maintains Lou Pollock cemetery. Congregation Beth HaTephila (CBHT) owns a designated section within Riverside Cemetery to accommodate graves for members of the congregation. Members of Congregation Agudas Israel in Hendersonville may arrange for burials at Shepherd Memorial Park. Some Jewish funerals are held at the Western Carolina State Veterans Cemetery in Black Mountain or other cemeteries in the [area](#).

Once the decision has been made concerning the cemetery, the appropriate cemetery coordinator must be contacted, either to purchase a plot or to identify a pre-purchased plot.

If someone other than the CBHT rabbi is performing a funeral at the CBHT section of Riverside Cemetery, then the CBHT rabbi must be contacted, as a courtesy, and informed of the funeral plans. Likewise, the CBI rabbi must be contacted whenever a funeral occurs at Lou Pollock Cemetery.

Chevra Kadisha – Preparing the Deceased for Burial

Chevra Kadisha means “The Sacred Society.” In the vernacular, it means “Team Holiness.” The Western North Carolina Jewish Burial Society serves as the *Chevra Kadisha* for our region.

A typical *chevra kadisha* may be involved in three activities: *Shmira* (“guarding” or watching the deceased before the funeral); *Tahara*, (preparing the deceased for burial by performing ritual washing and dressing); and *Nihum Avelim* (comforting the bereaved before and during *shiva*).

In Asheville, the responsibilities of the three parts of the *Chevra Kadisha* are performed by three groups of volunteers. (1) The Western North Carolina Jewish Burial Society performs the *tahara*. (2) A designated individual at each synagogue coordinates the community *Shomrim* (“watchers”) for each funeral. (3) A caring committee or *chesed* committee offers support for the family during the *shiva*.

The family must determine if they wish to have *tahara* performed on their loved one and if they wish to have *shomrim*. Once these decisions are made, the funeral home will contact the *Chevra Kadisha* and the *shomrim* coordinator for the associated synagogue. If there is no synagogue involved, then the *shomrim* coordinators will determine among themselves who will be the coordinator.

Tahara – Washing the Deceased

Tahara means the washing of the body from head to toe by pouring water over it, and then the dressing of the body in the plain linen shrouds (*Tachrichim*) in which it will be buried. Usually made of white, pure linen, *Tachrichim* symbolize that we are all equal in death. The simple white garment without pockets is physical proof that we take nothing with us when we leave this world, and that God judges us on our merits and deeds, not the material wealth we may have accumulated. Men serving on the *Chevra Kadisha* prepare a male deceased, and women serving on the *Chevra Kadisha* prepare a female deceased.

If a death occurs in Asheville but the burial will take place in another city, it is best to have *tahara* performed in the city where the burial will occur. Since the *Chevra Kadisha* are volunteers, it is not always possible to perform *tahara* on short notice that will meet the transportation needs of the family when the burial is scheduled to take place elsewhere. There are times when circumstances call for a different path. This will be decided individually by the appropriate members of the *Chevra Kadisha*.

Members of our *tahara* group have received training, and new members observe and participate in a *tahara* session before deciding if they want to be a part of this group. The performance of *tahara* is a very solemn but uplifting experience.

At present, there is a suggested donation of \$180 for *Tahara* to cover expenses of the *Chevra Kadisha* related to education, indigent burials, and supplies.

Shomrim – Guarding the Deceased

Immediately following a death, the deceased should not, according to tradition, be left unattended. A *shomer*, or "watchman," stays with the deceased from the time of death until the funeral and burial. A bereaved family can request *shomrim* for daytime hours only or both daytime and overnight (At present, there is an additional charge of \$180 per evening for overnight *shomrim*).

When a family requests *shomrim* for their loved one, the synagogue's *shomrim* coordinator goes into action. Email requests are sent to the community *shomrim* volunteers, and schedules are set up with two-hour shifts, except for the overnight shift. An online calendar is used by the volunteers to sign up for shifts while the *shomrim* coordinator monitors the status of the volunteer shifts and sends email updates until all shifts are filled.

No training is required to perform the mitzvah of *shmira*. It is traditional to read psalms during this time, but it is not a requirement. Each funeral home has its own *shomrim* room where there is a book of psalms and a binder containing appropriate readings. The person performing this task does not actually need to see the deceased — before *tahara* has been performed, the deceased is usually in an adjacent room (and often that door is closed). After *tahara*, the deceased is brought into one of the funeral rooms in a closed casket. This mitzvah is one of *chesed shel emet* — a true mitzvah for which the recipient cannot thank you or repay you.

Pallbearers

It is a mitzvah to accompany or escort the casket. This custom dates back to the Bible when Jacob's children carried him to his last resting place. Regardless of whether carried on shoulders or by hand, or wheeled on a special cemetery device, this should be considered a signal honor and a symbol of personal tribute for those who participate.

The family usually chooses six to eight people to serve as pallbearers to help carry and escort the casket from the funeral service to the gravesite. Members of the deceased's immediate family may be selected as pallbearers; however, it would seem more advisable for others to carry the casket, rather than the immediate family, for fear of their being overcome with grief.

Because the pallbearers carry the casket at certain times, they should be capable of bearing the weight. It is sensible to ask older friends or relatives to serve as *honorary* pallbearers. This allows them the honor of serving as pallbearers without endangering their health.

There is a tendency to choose only men for this honor, but there is no religious reason that women should not be equally considered. It is traditional at Jewish burials for the pallbearers

to pause seven times as they carry the casket to the gravesite. This symbolizes the hesitation and unwillingness to remove the presence of the deceased. Some traditions include the recitation of Psalm 91 during the procession.

The Funeral

A mourner in Judaism is one who is defined as being *Kaddish*-related, which means they are obligated to observe the rites of mourning for the deceased. Those who are considered mourners are the spouse, parent, sibling, or child of the deceased. It's important to realize that other family members, although not technically considered mourners, may choose to observe many of the rites of mourning because of the close relationship they had with the deceased. From the time of death until the burial, the mourner is considered an *Onen* and is relieved of many of the normal obligations incumbent upon an individual. The main obligation of an *Onen* is to arrange for the proper Jewish burial of the deceased.

The funeral service may be held in the temple or synagogue, at the funeral home or at the cemetery. Many people today are opting for services at the cemetery only. It is difficult to predict how many people will attend a funeral, but if the deceased is young or leaves a large family, or is active in business or social activities, it is likely that a large number of people will want the opportunity to pay their respects by coming to the funeral. A traditional Jewish funeral would be one in which the casket is kept closed, and there is no viewing. Funerals consist of the recitation of psalms, scripture readings, and a eulogy.

Prior to the service, the mourners perform the ritual of *K'riah*, the rending of the garment. This ancient custom is symbolic of the tear that's in the mourner's heart. Traditionally, the clothing is torn, but many people today use a black ribbon that is attached to the outside of the clothing. When people see the ribbon, or the tear in the clothing, it is a sign that that person is a mourner. The ribbon is worn, or the clothing cut, on the left side of the person if they are mourning the death of a parent. For all other *Kaddish* relatives, the ribbon or clothing is cut on the person's right side. This is to acknowledge that the relationship with a parent is different, and therefore we observe the difference by performing the *K'riah*, on the side closest to the heart.

When we see a person wearing the ribbon or torn clothes, we should offer our condolences to the mourner, even if we don't know the mourner or whom they are mourning. Mourners are already uncomfortable, and when we see them, if we avoid talking to them or ignore the fact that they are mourners, it adds to their feelings of loneliness and isolation.

A special prayer is said when the clothing or ribbon is cut. ...'*Dayan Ha'emet*,' ..."Blessed is the Judge of Truth." This is said because as mortals, we cannot understand God's decrees and judgements. Rather, all we can do is accept those judgements and to acknowledge that God is in control of all life. Traditionally, the ribbon, or torn clothing, is worn for seven days, except on *Shabbat*. When mourning the death of a parent, the ribbon or torn clothing is traditionally worn for thirty days. Some festivals and holidays affect the observance and practice of the *K'riah*, and it is suggested you speak with your rabbi for the interpretations as they affect an individual set of circumstances.

The Burial

We accompany the deceased to their final resting place. The tradition is that the *Kaddish* prayer is not recited until after the casket has been lowered, and the grave filled. Dating back to Biblical times the preference for Jewish people has been earth burial, and that custom remains strong today.

The *Chesed Shel Emet*, the ultimate act of love and kindness, is shown to the deceased when the mourners and friends participate in the actual burial. Many people symbolically participate by placing a few shovels of earth onto the casket or vault. Because this is something the deceased cannot do for themselves; because the deceased cannot ask the mourners to do it for him/her/them; and since the deceased cannot repay--or even simply thank--the mourners for seeing to his/her/their proper Jewish burial, this becomes the ultimate, unselfish act of love and kindness.

Although extremely difficult and emotionally painful, the actual burial of our dead has been proven to be more beneficial, psychologically, than if the casket were left on top of the grave and the mourners walked away. Participating in and witnessing the burial gives closure to the relationship and affords the mourners an opportunity to do something physical for their

loved one for a final time. It also helps to minimize any illusions that the death might not have been real.

After the burial, upon leaving the grave, it is traditional for those in attendance who are not mourners to form a *Shura*, a double line facing each other, forming a pathway through which the mourners pass to receive words of comfort. Since tradition teaches us that we don't offer words of consolation to mourners until after the burial, this provides the first opportunity to express the traditional words of comfort, "May you be comforted among all the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." Any kind words of sympathy may be said to the mourners as they pass through the double line. There is an expression in Hebrew that translates, "Words from the heart go directly to the heart" and any kind expression that is honest and meaningful is appropriate at this time.

Following the Burial

There are many customs and traditions, many based on superstition, that surround the returning from the cemetery. Because many of these are just customs, it is best to discuss these with your rabbi. Some of the customs many Jewish people observe are covering the mirrors in the house of mourning, having a pitcher of water outside the house for mourners to wash their hands after leaving the cemetery, using a different route home from the cemetery, and a whole host of other customs. Your rabbi will be best able to guide you in which of these customs (and the reasons behind them) will be meaningful for you and your family.

One of the oldest, most important, and meaningful traditions is that upon returning to the house of mourning following the burial, the community provides the first meal. The synagogue's Caring/*Chesed* committee will arrange this meal for the family. Eggs or bagels are traditionally served to symbolize the continuity of life. This meal of condolence, called the *Seudat Havra'ah* was begun in recognition that if left on their own, the mourners may not eat and would then become ill. Another reason for the community to provide the first meal is to set the tone for the period of *Shiva*. The mourners are not to be "hosting" a party, nor are they to be concerned with taking care of other people's needs. Rather, the community is there to take care of the mourners.

Shiva - The First Period of Mourning

Shiva means seven and is the period of mourning immediately following the burial.

Tradition is that the day of burial counts as the first day of *Shiva*, which continues for seven days. Although no public mourning is observed on *Shabbat*, the Sabbath and Holidays count in the seven days. Many festivals affect the observance of *Shiva*, and your rabbi will be best qualified to explain how they affect a particular situation. For example, some festivals cancel the observance of *Shiva* completely, and some festivals postpone the beginning of *Shiva*. The family may decide to observe *Shiva* for fewer than the traditional **seven** days, and again, your rabbi will be in a position to advise you in your particular situation.

During *Shiva*, mourners remain at home and the Jewish community comes and offers comfort to them. The only time a mourner is supposed to leave the home is on *Shabbat* to attend services. During the *Shiva* period the community comes into the mourner's home, and it is there that the *Shiva* minyan service is held. The *Kaddish* prayer is recited during this minyan. Some families include the custom of ending *Shiva* by taking a walk—down the street, around the block—as a symbol of reentering the everyday world.

Shloshim - The Second Period of Mourning

Shloshim, which means thirty in Hebrew, is the thirty days following the burial, with the day of the burial counting as the first day. Usually, *Shiva* is the first seven days of *Shloshim*. As with *Shiva*, some festivals affect the *Shloshim* period, and your rabbi will advise you how a festival impacts a particular situation.

At the conclusion of *Shiva*, *Shloshim* serves as a period of re-entry into the world of the living for the mourner. This is the time when the mourner returns to work or school and begins to start living without their loved one. During *Shloshim*, the mourner traditionally avoids music, gaiety, and other forms of celebrations. Your rabbi will help you with specific questions that may arise, such as what happens if a previously scheduled wedding or Bar/Bat Mitzvah occurs during the *Shloshim* period.

Yahrzeit

The annual anniversary of the death of a person is called the *Yahrzeit* and is traditionally observed based on the Hebrew calendar. The *yahrzeit* is observed by lighting a twenty-four hour candle the evening before the day of the *yahrzeit*, and most people recite the *Kaddish* and take a few moments of introspection and thought. Most congregations recite the name of the deceased whose *yahrzeit* is being observed during the *Shabbat* services closest to the date.

Unveiling/Dedication of the Marker

Although there is nothing in Judaism that requires an unveiling or dedication service, most families choose to have some sort of ceremony when the grave marker or headstone is put in place. We are required to mark the grave of a deceased, and the most common time for this to take place is close to the first *yahrzeit*. But, traditionally, any time after *Shloshim*, the marker or monument can be set in place.

A *Matzava*, or headstone, can be as elaborate or as simple as the family wishes, so long as it conforms to the rules and regulations of the cemetery. Most often the person's Hebrew name is inscribed along with the dates of birth and death. Your rabbi will be helpful in having the deceased's Hebrew name correctly inscribed in the monument, as well as helping you prepare an unveiling ceremony if you choose not to have a rabbi officiate.

Visiting the Grave

Judaism teaches that mourners should not show excessive grief and should avoid deifying the deceased. To this end, cemetery visitation should not be too frequent. Some authorities have said that the first time a mourner can return to the grave is after *Shloshim*, while others say a mourner may visit the grave at the conclusion of *Shiva*.

It is traditional that when one attends a burial, visiting the graves of others who are buried there is not done. Not visiting other graves is out of respect to the person who is being

buried, as well as to the person previously interred. Exceptions to this rule would be if the people have come from a far distance or if making another trip would cause undue hardship.

Contact Information for Area Rabbis:

Rabbi Wolff Alterman
WNC Chaplain
(828) 337- 6185

Rabbi Geoff Brown
Director of Congregational Support
Congregation Beth Israel
(757) 344-3402

Rabbi Justin Goldstein
Director of Education
Congregation Beth Israel
(828) 778-1282

Rabbi Batsheva Meiri
Congregation Beth HaTephila
(828) 253-4911

Rabbi Shaya Susskind
Chabad-Lubavitch WNC
(828) 505-0746/(828) 335-4064