

INTRODUCTION

In the Jewish tradition, death is part of the cycle of life. Our Jewish traditions emphasize treating the dead with respect and comforting mourners. These traditions that understand the needs of the living have come down to us as our Jewish laws, customs, and practices of death and mourning.

As a Reform congregation, we recognize that no single way is the only correct one. This document outlines Beth El's minhagim (customs) of death and bereavement.

The death of a loved one can be sudden or prolonged and thinking about the needed arrangements ahead of time can ease stress. You'll find a useful family information form at the end of this guide. Keep this form in a safe place and make sure your family knows where it is.

PUTTING YOUR HOUSE IN ORDER

Make it easy for your family to find the information they will need at the time of your death. An attorney can assist with such legal matters as a will, a durable power of attorney, medical power of attorney, a living will, preserving financial assets, and other legal considerations. Your doctors and lawyers also need your consent to discuss your affairs with someone you trust when necessary.

A Will

Every adult should have a will. If your will was executed outside of Virginia, have it reviewed to make sure it complies with Virginia law.

Many people think of a will as a tax-saving device for a large estate or think a will is unnecessary unless death is imminent. However, every adult, regardless of age or financial situation, should relieve his or her family of the burden of allocating financial assets and disposing of personal possessions. Complications for survivors can be significant if a person dies intestate--without a will.

For example, if a married person dies without a will, children (whether minors or adults) share in the estate. If a parent wishes to leave most or all of the estate to the surviving spouse, this can be accomplished only by a will.

Other reasons for a will are to reduce probate and other legal costs, to appoint an executor/executrix, or to provide a guardian for minor children.

A will can **also** indicate funeral arrangements. For example, cremation (which is not recognized in traditional Judaism but is permitted in Reform practice) can be specified in a will. Individuals can donate their body, or parts of it, for medical use or transplant. Such explicit written directions prevent potential charges that the decisions are those of the survivors and not the deceased.

Durable Power of Attorney

A power of attorney (POA) is a document giving a person you trust (your agent) the power to make decisions on your behalf if you cannot do so yourself. These can include legal, financial, and/or medical decisions. Having a POA ensures that if you are incapacitated, your agent can handle your medical expenses, pay your bills and taxes, and the like.

Advanced Directive (Living Will)

Many people do not wish to be kept alive through extraordinary medical means or with permanent mechanical assistance when there is no hope for recovery. An advanced directive (also called a living will) can specify what medical treatments are to be refused (in states where it is legal to do so). An advanced directive helps an individual's doctor and family to understand the patient's wishes regarding medical treatment. Virginia law specifies that any adult capable of making an informed decision may, at any time, make a written advance directive to address health care in the event the declarant is later determined to be incapable of making an informed decision. A written advance directive must be signed by the declarant in the presence of two witnesses and may specify the health care the declarant does or does not authorize; appoint an agent to make health care decisions for the declarant; and specify an anatomical gift, after the declarant's death, of all of the declarant's body or an organ, tissue or eye donation.

Ethical Will

An ethical will contains the beliefs you wish to perpetuate and has been a Jewish tradition for centuries. Our clergy have examples of ethical wills on file and can share them with you. It is a *mitzvah* to prepare an ethical will for the moral guidance of your family, particularly children. It's advisable to prepare an ethical will when you are healthy. All wills should be kept in a safe place that is known to your family.

ILLNESS

While Judaism prescribes prayer by and for the sick, prayer is never a substitute for medical treatment. It is a *mitzvah* to pray for the seriously ill. It is also a *mitzvah* to

offer a prayer of thanks when one recovers from a serious illness. Such prayers may be found in *On the Doorposts of Your House*. (CCAR Press and available on Amazon) and *Mishkan R'fuah: Where Healing Resides*, (CCAR Press and Amazon).

In case of serious illness, our clergy should be informed.

Visiting the sick is also a *mitzvah* with the intent of cheering the sick, being of service, and offering hope. Our Caring Community Committee will help families where needed.

It is a *mitzvah* for a critically ill person to recite a special prayer of confession and it is also a *mitzvah* to help a person recite it if they ask for help. The prayer of confession, *Viddui*, may be personal or found in *On the Doorposts of Your House*. The *Viddui* concludes with the traditional *Shema*.

Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad.

Hear O Israel, The Lord Our God, Our God Is One.

DYING AND LAST RITES

Unless death occurs suddenly, it is a *mitzvah* to help the dying make peace with God, with themselves, and with others. This is a time for closure, repairing damaged relationships, and restoring wholeness.

Family and close friends can see that the individual's pain is eased and last wishes granted. It is a religious obligation to not leave a person on the threshold of death alone. The familiar presence of loved ones can ease the final hours for both the dying and the survivors.

Judaism forbids hastening death, or "active euthanasia" in terminal illness. However, many classic Judaic texts assert that neither should one hinder the departure of the soul. Heroic measures to keep a person alive when there is no hope for recovery are not required.

In case of impending death, our clergy should be called. If the dying person has left an advanced directive or other written instructions, the family should consult with the clergy.

Don't hesitate to contact the clergy in the case of a suicide. Jewish tradition encourages approaching the tragedy of suicide with compassion and understanding, and full funeral rites will be given.

When it is clear that the end is near, those present say the *Viddui* on behalf of the dying if the individual cannot say it.

Immediately after death, it is traditional for family members to say:

Baruch dayan ha-emet.

Blessed is the Judge of Truth.

AT TIME OF DEATH

When a death occurs, whoever on Beth El's professional staff first hears about it immediately calls or emails the rabbi. If the rabbi is contacted directly by an immediate family member of the deceased or a call is received on Beth El's emergency line, the call will be immediately returned.

The clergy will also contact our Caring Community Committee and a member of the committee will contact you to offer assistance.

The rabbi will call the bereaved to express condolences and to aid their funeral/memorial preparations. The bereaved will be asked if they would like a congregational email to inform the community and spare them the effort of informing people during these difficult hours. If funeral and shiva arrangements are not yet in place, Beth El will hold the congregational notice until the arrangements are set. Usually, only one email announcing the death and shiva arrangements (if appropriate) will be sent.

When a death occurs, to reach Beth El outside of business hours call the main number (703-370-9400), press 1 when the recorded message comes on and leave a message at the prompt. Your message will be immediately forwarded to clergy and your call returned.

You may also want to call a family member or close friend to stay with you and help you during the next hours.

Caring Community Committee

The Caring Community Committee (CCC) can help you after a death in your immediate family. The type of help depends on what you request. The CCC can assist with funeral arrangements and shivas. A list of all the services the CCC can provide is attached.

Funeral Arrangements

While traditional Jewish law specifies that burial take place within 24 hours after the death, funeral services, are not held on Shabbat, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and the first and last days of the major festivals: Passover, Sukkot and Shavuot. In Reform tradition, however, the funeral should be held as soon as possible considering the need for family members to make travel arrangements. There is solid psychological insight for the tradition of a quick burial. The funeral and burial services are a difficult time, and delaying the reality of death is not helpful.

Any local funeral home may be used. Beth El members have often used the Jefferson

Funeral Chapel in the Alexandria section of Fairfax County and Jefferson offers a special basic package of services to local synagogues. Cunningham Torch in the City of Alexandria has a basic Jewish funeral package through its contract with the Jewish Funeral Practices Committee of Greater Washington.

The funeral home you choose will:

- Transfer the deceased to the funeral home;
- Prepare the body without embalming;
- Prepare all documents, including a death certificate (You'll need additional copies; order more than you think you will need);
- Provide a casket, including the traditional simple all-wood coffin;
- Arrange for the funeral service at Beth El and the vehicle procession to the cemetery;
- Supply the seven-day *shiva* candle, acknowledgment cards, and guest book;
- Place death notices in the local papers at the family's expense;
- Coordinate with other funeral homes and cemeteries as necessary if the death took place out of town.

The funeral director can also arrange for limousines and drivers (at additional charge) to take the family from their home to the temple, the cemetery, and back to their home.

The cemetery plot number should be available at the time funeral arrangements are made. If the deceased was a veteran, he or she has death benefits including privileges at certain national cemeteries.

Beth El has a historical relationship with Home of Peace Cemetery in the City of Alexandria and a small number of plots are still available to Beth El members. (The cemetery is administered by the Hebrew Benevolent Society, an affiliate of Beth El). Contact information is available on the website or through the temple office.

Non-Jewish immediate family members may be buried at Home of Peace. No non-Jewish burial services may be performed although the presence of Jewish clergy is not required. All burials must be coordinated with a funeral home and the Benevolent Society and with the synagogue if the family wishes the clergy to preside. Urn burials are permitted. Scattering of ashes is not permitted. All headstones/markers must be approved by the Benevolent Society. No sculptures or non-Jewish symbols are permitted, nor are coping stones around the grave site.

King David Memorial Park (part of National Memorial Park) is located in Falls Church, Virginia. Non-Jewish family members may not be buried here but there is a section for interfaith burials within National Memorial Park. Cremation may also be arranged.

Out of Town Deaths or Funerals

If a death or funeral occurs out of town, chose the provider based on the site of the

funeral rather than where the death occurred. Contact a local funeral provider at the funeral location to assist with the necessary shipping arrangements.

Children

Decisions about attendance at a funeral and/or burial are best made in discussions that include the child. Explanations and descriptions of the funeral service, the cemetery, and the burial that respond to a child's questions can help determine if the child is emotionally ready to attend. Many children have a need for closure equal to that of adults. The funeral and subsequent family discussion can help children develop understanding to handle future loss and grief. Since each child is unique and each family has different concerns, this matter is best discussed with the clergy at the appropriate time. There are other observances, such as *shiva*, in which children can participate.

Autopsy

Reform Judaism permits autopsies as long as they are performed for increasing medical knowledge that will help others to live. If the deceased has forbidden autopsy, the instructions should be honored, except when civil law requires it.

Cremation

While the Reform Movement permits cremation, more traditional members of a family may observe the *halachic* prohibition against it. If you wish to be cremated, make this known to your loved ones and to the clergy. Leave written instructions in addition to what is in your will.

A memorial service can be held instead of a funeral with a coffin. Ashes may be taken home, spread, or interred in a cemetery with that cemetery's permission. (Note: ashes may not be spread at Home of Peace.) You must check with the particular cemetery regarding their rules about ashes.

Donation of Body to Medical Use

While Jewish tradition forbids donating one's entire body to science, Reform Judaism permits this practice, provided that the scientific institution to which the body is donated is known to treat the body with respect, and the remains are buried or cremated when the study is completed.

It is a *mitzvah* to donate organs to help the living. In Virginia, the uniform donor document on the driver's license establishes your desire to donate.

You should discuss your intention with your family and the clergy and indicate your wishes in your family information form as well as in your will.

Embalming

Embalming is the replacement of body fluids with a preservative and traditional Jewish law prohibits it. Civil laws usually do not require it. In Virginia, if burial or cremation will not take place within 48 hours of death, the body must be refrigerated or embalmed. A body may not be embalmed without permission from the next of kin or a court order. A body taken across state lines requires embalming or other special treatment.

BURIAL PREPARATIONS

There are three practices, regarded as fundamental religious obligations in traditional Judaism:

- a Jewish person, or *shomer*, to watch over the body until burial;
- ritual washing of the body, and;
- burial in a simple white garment, a shroud.

Although Reform Judaism does not require any of these rituals, it recognizes that there will be family members who wish to observe some or all of them

The usual Reform practice is to bury the body in whatever clothes the family wishes, usually something of the deceased's regular wardrobe. If you want to observe some of the traditional rituals, discuss the availability of a *chevra kedisha* or holiness group, with the clergy. They and/or the funeral chapel will assist you.

Coffin

Jewish religious law specifies that the coffin be completely of wood without nails or metal handles. This is because metal and concrete burial vaults that contain the casket would retard the natural processes.

Reform practice allows, but does not encourage, anything other than a traditional coffin. Similarly, Reform practice permits use of an above-ground mausoleum when the deceased and the family wish it.

Closing the Coffin

After preparation for burial, the body is placed in the coffin and the coffin is closed. Jewish tradition opposes public viewing of the deceased in an open coffin. The family may view the body privately before the funeral service but the coffin should be sealed permanently before the service begins.

Pre-funeral visitation in the chapel is not in keeping with Jewish tradition and is discouraged. This is in accordance with Jewish teaching in the *Talmud* that: "One is

not to comfort the bereaved while their dead still lie unburied."

FUNERAL AND BURIAL SERVICES

Jewish tradition teaches that we should bury within a day after death. Funerals are never held on Jewish festivals or Shabbat and are conducted during daylight hours. The principle is to conduct the funeral and burial as soon as possible, mindful of travel arrangements necessary for out-of-town mourners. This generally means within two days of death. (If a family member is to be buried at Arlington Cemetery, be aware that the burial can be substantially delayed.)

Funeral services may be held at Beth El, in your home, at the funeral home, or graveside. Beth El clergy usually officiate at the funeral service. Eulogies may be given by the officiant, family, or friends, and should be without embellishments or extraordinary praise for the deceased. Non-Jews may give a eulogy. The funeral director will not conduct the service.

Pallbearers

The family of the deceased chooses the pallbearers, usually six members of the extended family or close friends. Members of the immediate family do not act as pallbearers. While traditional Judaism requires that pallbearers be Jewish, Reform Judaism recognizes that a good friend should not be slighted because s/he is not Jewish so non-Jews may be pallbearers. It is considered an honor to escort the deceased to his or her final resting-place. Pallbearers carry (or accompany) the casket from the chapel to the hearse, and later from the hearse to the gravesite.

In lieu of the traditional rending of garments, a black ribbon, or *keriah*, may be cut prior to the funeral and worn by immediate family members during the bereavement period.

Instead of sending flowers, it's customary to make a contribution to a charity, synagogue, hospital, or medical research foundation.

MOURNING

Returning from the Cemetery to the House of Mourning

Washing one's hands symbolizes purification after contact with the dead and is intended to turn the attention back to the living. A bowl of water and a towel are placed outside the mourner's home for this purpose and all are encouraged to take part in this custom.

After burial, attention shifts from paying respect to the deceased to easing the pain of the living. Jewish laws and practices define mourning periods and ways to bring the bereaved back into the stream of life.

Mourning Practices

The *Talmud* recognizes the difference between formal rites of mourning and personal grief. Reform practice recognizes that one may grieve for any dear person, but it is a religious duty to mourn for husband, wife, son, daughter, brother, sister, step-parent, step-child, foster parent, and adopted child, as well as for a mother, father, grandmother, and grandfather. Although mourning need not be observed for an infant less than 30 days old, Reform Jews usually observe some rites of grieving.

According to Jewish tradition, the period of mourning lasts for a full year and includes: 1) the period between death and burial when the mourners should be free of all ritual and social obligations except observance of Shabbat and funeral and burial arrangements; 2) *shiva*, the seven days of mourning following the burial; 3) *sheloshim*, the 30 days, including *shiva*, after burial, when normal life gradually begins to resume; and 4) the balance of the year of mourning.

Shiva

During *shiva*, members of the bereaved family are encouraged to remain at home, to refrain from ordinary pursuits, and to participate in daily services at home. While Reform practice usually observes three days, the decision to observe the full *shiva* period, or to shorten it, is a personal one and many Beth El shivas are only one day.

Home Services. In our congregation, a home service may be held on the day of the funeral and the following two days. Today, our members often have at least one home service, usually on the evening following the interment. These services are available upon request and may be conducted by knowledgeable temple leaders. Beth El provides prayer booklets with the service.

Both men and women may constitute a *minyan* to conduct this service. Beth El's Caring Community Committee can help to arrange the home service, if asked. All forms of mourning are suspended on Shabbat, the festivals, and the High Holy Days. Mourners are encouraged to attend synagogue on the Friday evening and Saturday morning of the *shiva week* to recite *Kaddish*, the prayer for the dead.

Meal of Condolence. It is a *mitzvah* for friends to prepare the first meal eaten by mourners on returning from the cemetery so they may be spared the need to prepare food. This meal of consolation should not be lavish. Traditionally, it is a simple dairy meal and a time for family and friends to come together to lend their strength to the bereaved. It is a symbol that life must go on and a bridge to the continuation of ordinary life. If friends are not available to provide this meal, the temple Caring Community Committee can help with food pick up, set up, and clean up.

Memorial Candle. During the *shiva* period, a seven-day memorial candle, usually provided by the funeral home, is lit at the home of the bereaved. The candle should be lit by a mourner on return from the funeral as a symbol of the light the deceased brought to the bereaved during life.

Condolence Calls. It is appropriate for friends and members of the congregation to visit the home of the bereaved following the burial during the *shiva* period. It is also helpful to visit the family after *shiva* when the reality of the loss has set in.

Sheloshim

After *shiva*, normal occupational and family activities are resumed. During *sheloshim*, the family should refrain from public entertainment or parties. It is acceptable to attend meetings concerned with civic, religious, or welfare activities. One can also proceed with existing wedding plans and may study Torah in the synagogue in memory of the deceased.

The First Year

Reform practice observes mourning for up to 12 months following the funeral. Attendance at weekly Shabbat services is recommended. (The period may be determined by the individual and our clergy are available for consultation.)

Kaddish, Yahrzeit, Yizkor. In some communities, the *Kaddish* is recited in memory of the deceased for a year. At Beth El the deceased is memorialized by name at Shabbat services for 30 days following death, but it is customary for mourners to say *Kaddish* for a year after the day of death. The prayer affirms our faith in God.

It is a *mitzvah* to annually observe the *yahrzeit*, or anniversary, of the day of death. Customary observances are attending services at the synagogue, reciting the *Kaddish*, and lighting a 24-hour candle at home in the evening of the day of burial. Beth El emails *Yahrzeit* notices. *Yartzits* may be established according to the English or Hebrew calendar. *Yizkor* is the memorial service held on the afternoon of Yom Kippur and the mornings of the last day of festivals. It is customary to remember loved ones on these occasions with special prayers.

Cemetery Visits. According to custom, there are no visits to the cemetery for the first month following burial. One can visit at all other times except Shabbat and festivals. Usually, one visits the graves of loved ones during the month before Rosh Hashanah.

Memorial Marker. Tombstones or memorial markers are customarily set up within a year of death, and may be set in place any time after *sheloshim*. Simplicity and dignity should govern their selection. The unveiling or dedication ceremony may be held any day except Shabbat or Jewish holidays. The ritual may be conducted by family or clergy. The cover of the stone is removed at the unveiling. The unveiling ceremony is brief, without a eulogy and a copy of the appropriate services may be obtained from Beth El. The family gathers at the grave for this ceremony and returns home afterward. The only necessary arrangement with the cemetery is to assure that the gates are open and the tombstone or marker is in place.

Summary List at Time of Death

- Call 911 if death occurs at home
 - Obtain multiple death certificates (more than you think you'll need) and have the body transferred to the funeral provider (The funeral home can obtain the death certificates for you.)
 - Make key funeral (or memorial) service and burial decisions. Design the funeral service with the clergy
 - Select the funeral service site
 - Select the casket
 - Select the pallbearers
 - Finalize the burial property purchase and maintenance
 - Make decisions regarding children's attendance, private viewing of the deceased, if desired, and any additional rituals that may be desired
 - Arrange for the seudat havra-ah (meal of condolence following the burial service) if desired.
 - Arrange for hand washing following the interment
- Decide on mourning practices:
- Shiva
 - Sheloshim (30 days)
 - Plan for remembrance (yahrzeit and yizkor)

BETH EL CARING COMMUNITY COMMITTEE--HELP WHEN A DEATH OCCURS

When a family member dies, your Beth El family can help in the following ways:

On the day of the funeral, provide ushers to greet mourners and direct them to the sanctuary, cloakroom, and restrooms; and offer other assistance at the time of the funeral.

Provide you and your immediate family a meal of condolence, either when you return home from the funeral or at another time during the first week of mourning.

For shiva, help set up your home, provide assistance during the shiva service, and help clean up afterwards.

Coordinate with other groups (such as your havurah) that would also like to assist you.

Provide and deliver cheese and crackers, fruit, and baked goods for the shiva.

For more substantial shiva food, plate what you've bought or pick up and deliver prepaid platters from Giant, Wegmans, or other nearby stores.

Offer a Life After Loss" support group

Resources

Area Funeral Providers and Cemeteries

Jefferson Funeral Chapel
5755 Castlewellan Drive
Alexandria, VA
703-971-7400

Cunningham Turch Funeral Home
811 Cameron Street
Alexandria, VA
703-549-1800

Home of Peace
741 South Payne Street, Alexandria,
Contact is through Beth El

National Memorial Park
King David Memorial Gardens
7482 Lee Highway
Falls Church, VA
703-2894750

Advanced Directives

Caring Connections
National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization
1731 King Street
Alexandria, VA
877-470-6472

Five Wishes Brochure
www.fivewishes.org
850-681-2010

Reading Materials

Reading Materials

<https://reformjudaism.org/beliefs-practices/lifecycle-rituals/death-mourning/end-life-decisions-discussion-guide>

[End-of-Life Decisions: A Discussion Guide | Reform Judaism](#)

11 Questions and answers to help you talk to children about death

<https://reformjudaism.org/reform-jewish-life/youth-family-community/parenting/11-questions-and-answers-help-you-talk-children-about-death#:~:text=By%20acknowledging%20death%2C%20we%20learn,o>

Helping Children of different ages cope with a death

Myjewishlearning.com

[Helping Children of Different Ages Cope with a Death | My Jewish Learning](#)

[How to Talk to Kids About Death and Dying | PJ Library](#)

The following books are available on Amazon.com

A Candle for Grandpa

Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead, and Mourn as a Jew

The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning

Jewish Insights on Death and Mourning

The Bright Hour: A Memoir of Living and Dying

Death and Afterlife: The Death of Death (Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought

Does the Soul Survive? A Jewish Journey to Belief in Afterlife, Past Lives, and Living with Purpose

Family Information Form

(This form should be kept at your home. Please inform your loved ones where this form is kept.)

FULL NAMES OF IMMEDIATE FAMILY

English Name	Hebrew Name	Birth Date	Citizenship
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

Birth Certificates are kept: _____

WILLS AND INSURANCE

Legal Advisor: _____; Phone/Email: _____

Executor/executrix: _____ Phone/Email: _____

Will is kept: _____

Other wills (living, ethical) are kept: _____

Life insurance agent: _____ Phone/ Email: _____

Life insurance company: _____ Phone/Email: _____

Policy numbers: _____

Policies are kept: _____

Health and accident insurance agent: _____ Phone/Email: _____

Health and accident insurance company: _____ Phone/Email: _____

Policy numbers: _____

Policies are kept: _____

Medicare registration: (Circle) Yes No Medicare Number: _____

Medicare insurance card kept: _____

SAFE DEPOSIT BOX

Box Number: _____ Box location: _____

Key is kept: _____

BANK ACCOUNT

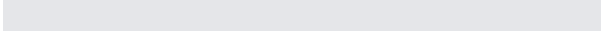
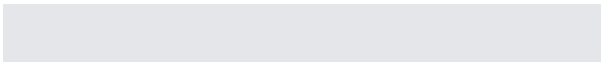
Name of Bank and Location	Checking Account #'s	Savings Account #'s
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBERS

Name: _____ Number: _____ Name: _____ Number: _____

Name: _____ Number: _____ Name: _____ Number: _____

Cards and information are kept: _____



PENSIONS, IRAs, ANNUITIES

List of holdings: _____

Information is kept: _____

SECURITIES

List of holdings: _____

Information is kept: _____

REAL ESTATE

List of holdings: _____

MILITARY SERVICE

Number: _____ Discharge papers are kept: _____

FUNERAL HOME

Name: _____

Letter on file: _____

CEMETERY PROPERTY

Name: _____ Deed Number: _____ Number of spaces: ____ _

SPECIAL FUNERAL ARRANGEMENTS

(cremation, donation of body to medical use, and so forth)

RELATIVES AND CLOSE FRIENDS TO BE NOTIFIED

Name	Address	Phone/Email
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

OTHER REMARKS:
