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# Mourning

*the loss of a Jewish loved one*

**18 DOORS**

Unlocking Jewish



# mourning

If your Jewish loved one or life-partner has reached an end-of-life or hospice stage of an illness, we offer our prayers for strength, courage and love. If you and/or your loved one want to talk with a rabbi or someone in the Jewish community, here's our advice:

- ▶ If you are members of a synagogue, call them and ask for a rabbinic visit. Rabbis and cantors receive pastoral care training for these situations, and many synagogues also have volunteers who will visit and offer support.
- ▶ If you aren't connected with a synagogue, there are still ways you can reach out to the organized Jewish community.
  - ▶ Visit [www.interfaithfamily.com/findarabbi](http://www.interfaithfamily.com/findarabbi) and fill out our Jewish clergy request form. We'll get back to you with suggested contacts.
  - ▶ You can also try calling your nearest Jewish Federation. Federations are Jewish social-service and community resource organizations. To find the nearest Federation, visit [www.jewishfederations.org](http://www.jewishfederations.org). They may be able to connect you with a synagogue or other Jewish community resources.

## If You've Just Lost a Jewish Loved One

Whether or not you identify as Jewish, please know that you are part of the life and fabric of the Jewish community. The fact that you've loved and lost someone Jewish, and that you're reading this guide, means that your life and heart have touched and been touched by the Jewish community. At *InterfaithFamily*, we wish you comfort and strength during this painful time. May the memory of your loved one be a blessing, always.

## If You Belong to a Synagogue

Call the synagogue and tell them. Synagogues have procedures they activate when they learn that a member has died. If you call after hours, it's likely they'll have recorded instructions for who to call in the case of a death or pastoral emergency.

If you have made pre-arrangements with a funeral home, call them right away. Let them know the name of your synagogue, so they can communicate with them and coordinate logistics.

If you have not made pre-arrangements with a funeral home, the synagogue's response team will be able to go over your funeral home options with you.

## If You Don't Belong to a Synagogue

If your loved one expressed the desire to have a Jewish or partly-Jewish funeral, or if you aren't sure what his/her wishes were, you can call a nearby synagogue and a funeral home.

### *Finding a Synagogue*

As a general rule, Reform, Reconstructionist, Renewal and Humanistic synagogues are the most likely to have the most open and welcoming practices in working with interfaith families. This is not to say that you

wouldn't find wonderful support and compassion from an Orthodox or Conservative synagogue, but if flexibility regarding traditional Jewish ritual laws is important to you at this time, then you're more likely to find what you're looking for among the more liberal denominations of Judaism.

### *Finding a Funeral Home*

There's a list of non-profit Jewish funeral homes at [www.jewish-funerals.org](http://www.jewish-funerals.org). A directory of independent, family-owned Jewish funeral homes is at [www.nijfd.org](http://www.nijfd.org).

Many, though not all, general funeral homes are prepared to assist with Jewish funerals. If you do call a general funeral home, ask if they have experience with Jewish funerals, or if they can refer you to a funeral home that does.

If you visit [www.interfaithfamily.com/fndarabbi](http://www.interfaithfamily.com/fndarabbi), and submit our online clergy request form, we'll send you a list of rabbis or cantors in your area who officiate funerals.

## Important Decisions

### *Burial or Cremation?*

Traditional Jewish law prohibits cremation, but some Jews leave instructions that they want to be cremated. Rabbis generally understand and respect that. Some rabbis will officiate in cases of cremation, some will not and some will within certain limitations. If the Jewish clergy you're working with isn't able to provide you with the kind of service you're seeking, ask if s/he can refer you to a rabbi who will.

### *Choosing a Cemetery*

If it's a Jewish cemetery, you'll want to find out if that cemetery has sections where interfaith family members can be buried side by side. If you want to be buried next to your Jewish loved one who has just died, be aware that many Jewish cemeteries that welcome burial of family members of other faiths do have rules that may not permit funeral services led by clergy of another faith or headstones and grave markers bearing symbols of other religions. If you want to have clergy of your own faith tradition officiate at your funeral, or if you will want a grave marker with the symbol of your religion, it's important to ask the rabbi or cemetery to clarify what their rules are. Regarding cremations, Jewish cemeteries have varying rules about the burial of cremains. Some won't permit it; some allow it with some conditions attached; and others limit the burial of cremains to a specific section of the cemetery.



## Types of Services

There are three basic options:  
a graveside burial, a funeral, and graveside burial or memorial.

➤ **Graveside burial:** a short service held at the cemetery that typically includes a eulogy from a rabbi, several traditional prayers and the lowering of the casket into the grave. Attendees are then invited to place a shovel full of earth on the casket, which Judaism views as an act of kindness to the dead.

➤ **Funeral & graveside burial:** First, there's a funeral service away from the cemetery, often in a funeral home chapel. Short prayers and one or more eulogies are offered. After the funeral service, everyone goes to the burial site at the cemetery, where a short graveside service takes place.

➤ **Memorial:** This option is often selected for Jews who've chosen cremation. The service usually includes some of the same prayers, and a eulogy by a rabbi and/or others.

## Choosing a Casket

For burials, the traditional Jewish practice is to use a simple, wooden casket that is modest and inexpensive. This practice is based in the traditional Jewish belief that discourages outward displays of wealth during funerals, since all are equal in God's eyes.



## Additional Decisions

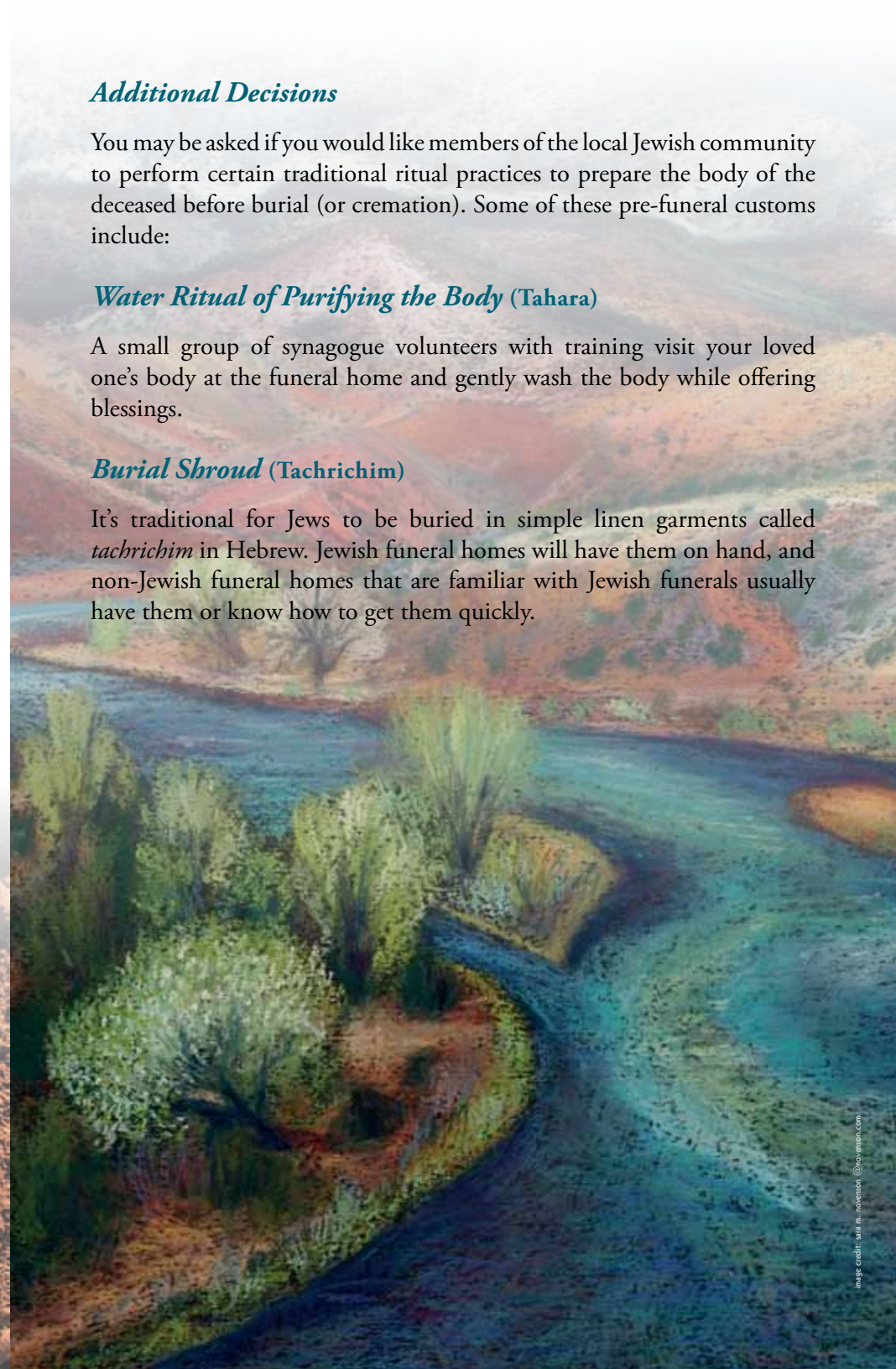
You may be asked if you would like members of the local Jewish community to perform certain traditional ritual practices to prepare the body of the deceased before burial (or cremation). Some of these pre-funeral customs include:

### *Water Ritual of Purifying the Body (Tahara)*

A small group of synagogue volunteers with training visit your loved one's body at the funeral home and gently wash the body while offering blessings.

### *Burial Shroud (Tachrichim)*

It's traditional for Jews to be buried in simple linen garments called *tachrichim* in Hebrew. Jewish funeral homes will have them on hand, and non-Jewish funeral homes that are familiar with Jewish funerals usually have them or know how to get them quickly.



## Jewish Funeral Services: The Main Elements

### *The Prayers*

The traditional Jewish funeral or graveside service is simple and is usually built around three prayers:

**Psalm 23** (“*God is my shepherd, I shall not want...*”)

**El Maleh Rachamim** (“*God Full of Compassion*”)

**The Mourner’s Kaddish** (*an ancient prayer giving honor to the dead*)

The officiant usually recites these prayers in Hebrew and English and there’s typically a eulogy given by the officiant or someone close to the deceased. This format is meant to be flexible. If there is other music, readings or poetry that you want included, discuss it with the rabbi. Military honors are easily incorporated into the service too. If there are religious rituals from your own faith tradition you would like incorporated, speak with clergy from your faith to see what rituals might be appropriate when mourning someone of another faith.

### *Other Parts of the Service*

**Kria** (“Tearing”): The officiant will provide the principal mourners with a small black ribbon that is pinned on their clothing. At the service’s beginning, s/he will ask the mourners to repeat a few words and tear the ribbon as a symbol of grief.

**Closed casket:** Jewish tradition calls for a closed casket. If loved ones want to have a viewing before the funeral, that can be arranged privately with the funeral home.

**Placing earth in the grave:** After the casket is lowered into the ground, everyone who wishes is invited to take a shovel full of earth and cast the dirt into the grave. Judaism teaches that this is an act of loving kindness toward the deceased. No one is required to participate, and the officiant will guide people through this process.

**No flowers:** In Jewish tradition people don’t bring flowers to funerals or have them sent to mourners. Instead, the custom is to make a charitable donation in memory of the deceased, and to bring food (or have it sent) to

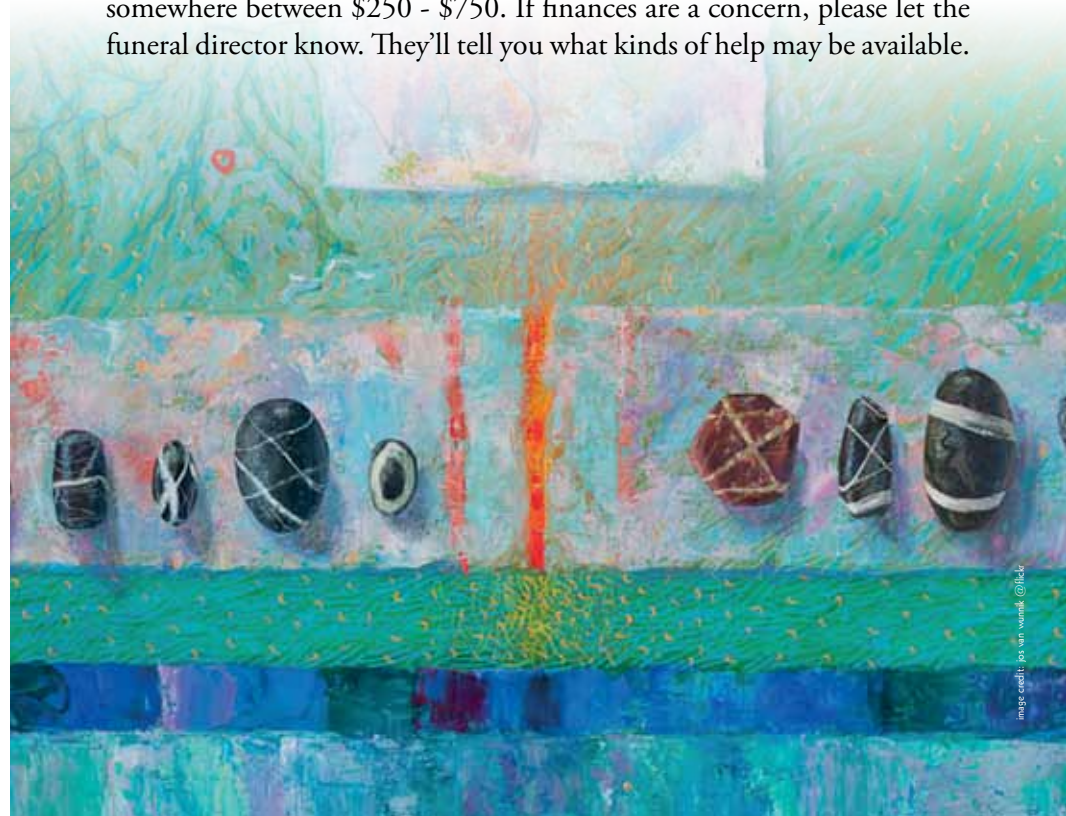
the home of those in mourning. If some people do bring flowers, however, simply thank them and accept the loving intention of the gesture.

### *Co-Officiation at Funerals*

If you wish to have prayers or readings from a different religion included in the service, or for a rabbi to co-officiate with clergy of another faith, explain this right away to the rabbi. Many rabbis aren’t willing to officiate in these circumstances, and some Jewish funeral homes and cemeteries have rules on these matters too. You’re always welcome to submit a Jewish clergy request at [www.interfaithfamily.com/findarabbi](http://www.interfaithfamily.com/findarabbi) in which you describe your needs. Though we can’t guarantee that we’ll be able to find the right match for you, we’ll do our best to try to connect you with a rabbi or cantor who works within the parameters you’ve described.

### *Clergy/Officiation Fees*

If you are members of a synagogue, there is usually no fee for the rabbi’s or cantor’s services. If you are not members of a synagogue, there usually is a requested honorarium for officiation. The fee can range but it’s usually somewhere between \$250 - \$750. If finances are a concern, please let the funeral director know. They’ll tell you what kinds of help may be available.



## Meal of Consolation

It is customary for the immediate mourners to return to their home after the service, and for others to join them for a meal of consolation. This is a meal that people other than the mourners prepare. Most synagogues have a committee that will organize this meal or else close friends and relatives can help out. There's no expectation for you to pay for or organize this meal – the idea is for community members to do it for you. Also, you and other mourners are not expected to play the role of “gracious hosts”; on the contrary, there's no expectation of you to do anything other than be in mourning during this time.

## The Weeks and Months Ahead

Judaism offers a framework for moving through commonly experienced phases of grief, and whether you are Jewish or not, you're entirely welcome to partake of these practices in whole or in part.

### The First Week

Mourners typically suspend their normal work/ school/ housework activities for the first week following the funeral/burial service, while family, friends and community members drop in to offer company, emotional support, prepared meals and sometimes help with other practical needs. This period is known as “sitting *shivah*” (“sitting for seven days”).

### The First Month

Judaism refers to the rest of the first month of mourning as a time during which mourners may resume some or all of their normal routines, based on what is most helpful to their healing process. This 30 day period is called *shloshim*. During this period, if you attend synagogue services, you may be invited to say the prayer known as the Mourner's Kaddish to honor the memory of your loved one. If you need help saying it, prefer

not to say it, or if you want to stand but not say it, all of these options are completely OK. Talk with your rabbi for guidance.

### The First Year

After *shloshim* ends, Jewish tradition teaches that, through the course of the first year following the death of a loved one, mourners are likely to face big emotional swings and a gradual, often uneven path through grief. Each holiday, birthday or anniversary that arrives for the first time without the deceased often revives intense feelings of loss.

Toward the end of the first year of mourning, many people have a short ceremony known as an “unveiling” at the burial site of their loved one, during which a headstone or permanent grave marker is formally “unveiled.” This ceremony is an opportunity for friends and family to give honor once more to the deceased, to share memories and to check in to see how mourners are doing.

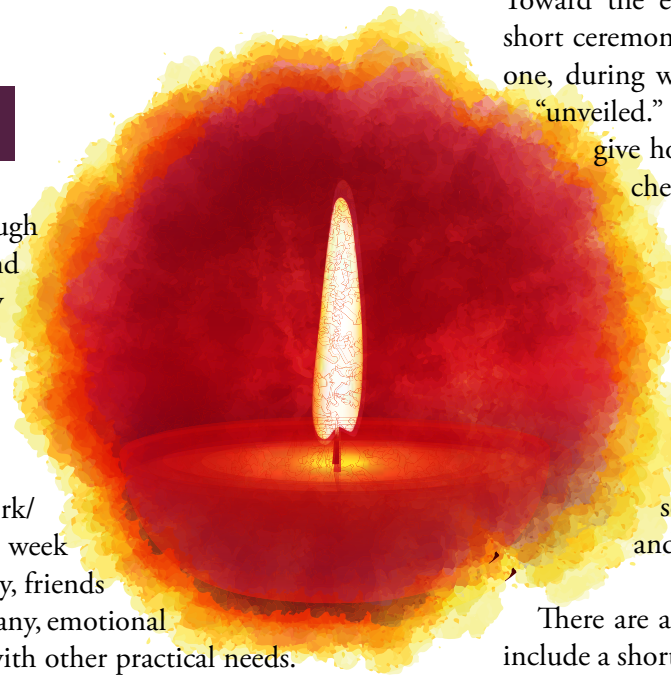
### Yahrtzeit & Saying the Mourner's Kaddish

The Yiddish word, *Yahrtzeit*, means “yearly anniversary,” and it refers to the anniversary of a loved one's death. This date is based on the Hebrew calendar, so the *Yahrtzeit* moves around a bit on the secular calendar from year to year. Principal mourners are invited to come to synagogue services every year at the time of their loved one's *Yahrtzeit*, and to join the congregation in saying the Kaddish prayer.

There are also four major Jewish holidays throughout the year which include a short service of remembrance of all those we've lost. This service is called *Yizkor*—the Hebrew word for “remembrance.” During *Yizkor*, everyone present is invited to rise and say the Kaddish prayer in memory of every loved one who has died. To find out when *Yizkor* services are taking place in your area, contact a nearby synagogue.

### Further Reading

We strongly recommend Anne Brener's book, *Mourning and Mitzvah*.





**18Doors** mission is to empower people in interfaith relationships— individuals, couples, families and their children— to make Jewish choices, and to encourage Jewish communities to welcome them.

**18Doors** offers consultation and resources for synagogues, agencies and schools of all affiliations to assist them in their welcome and engagement of interfaith families and all those who are interested in exploring Judaism.

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