

A Time to Mourn



A Guide to Jewish Funeral Practices

This guide was created as a resource for the Death and Bereavement Outreach Initiative at Temple De Hirsch Sinai. Additional information on the Jewish funeral practices may be found in the following publications or by consulting your rabbi.

The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning

Rabbi Maurice Lamm

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

Anita Diamant

The Bond of Life: A Book for Mourners

edited by Rabbi Jules Harlow

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Sacred Journeys
a caregiving, mourning and
bereavement initiative



INTRODUCTION

In the past, when a Jewish person died, no one asked, “When should we schedule the funeral?” or “Where will she be buried?” Members of the Jewish volunteer burial society simply appeared and began making these sacred arrangements.

The mourners, too, knew what to do. They ripped their clothing and sat on the floor. They stayed home, where prayer services were held three times a day during the first week. Heartbroken, yet surrounded by family and friends, they knew they were not alone.

It doesn’t work that way anymore. Jewish families are scattered and the community is dispersed. We live in an American society with normative secular customs and attitudes about bereavement that differ from those of Jewish tradition. Perhaps most confusing of all, while there is great comfort in understanding the architecture of Jewish mourning customs, this knowledge is only the beginning for non-Orthodox Jews who view *halachah*, Jewish law, as a reference point and not a mandate. We hope this guide to Jewish funeral practices will be an important start to this conversation with families and your rabbi.

adapted from “Saying Kaddish” by Anita Diamant

The light of life is a finite flame.
Like the Shabbat candles,
life is kindled, it burns, it glows,
it is radiant with warmth and beauty.
But soon it fades, its substance is consumed,
and it is no more.
In light we see;
in light we are seen.
The flames dance and our lives are full.
But as night follows day,
the candle of our life burns down and gutters.
There is an end to the flames.
We see no more
and are no more seen,
yet we do not despair,
for we are more than a memory
slowly fading into the darkness.
With our lives we give life.
Something of us can never die:
we move in the eternal cycle
of darkness and death,
of light and life.

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Before Death Occurs

Visiting the Sick

Judaism declares *bikkur cholim*, visiting the sick, both an obligation and a reward without measure. A comforting touch, a soothing voice, and the simple presence of family and friends can bring a measure of comfort to those who are ill. Medical research supports this conclusion even after there is “nothing left to do” from a medical perspective.

The *mitzvah* of visiting the sick is not just about being in the same room as a loved one who is ill but about recognizing and embracing the whole person and not just their symptoms. This kind of presence is no small thing; it is both the only thing and the greatest thing we can give to one another.

As great as this *mitzvah* is, care should be taken not to exhaust one who is ill with our need to care for them or with constant presence if it is not desired. Speak to the care team before entering the room and seek to honor the individual’s wishes.

Ethical Wills

For centuries, parents have left a document for their children bequeathing their spiritual, moral, and ethical legacy. An ethical will is a way to share your values, blessings, life lessons, and hopes with the loved ones we leave behind.

An ethical will is not a legal document; it does not distribute your material wealth. It is a heartfelt expression of what truly matters most in your life and an opportunity to leave something lasting for the generations that follow.

To begin crafting an ethical will, one need only sit down with paper and a pen. Wonderful examples can be found in the book *So That Your Values Live On* by Jack Riemer and Nathaniel Stampfer.

Prayer/Vidui (Confession)

Jewish prayer and ritual guides us during our most sacred moments in life and in death. This prayer, in Hebrew or English, may be recited as one puts their worldly affairs in order before the moment of death:

אֱלֹהֵי יְאֻלְהֵי אֲבוֹתַי וְאֲמוֹתַי, *Elohei veilohei avoti v'imoti*, 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, God of mercy and truth.



Advance Directives

As human beings live longer and medical technology continues to improve, end-of-life healthcare decisions are becoming increasingly complex. Simply because modern machinery and medicine can keep our many of our vital organs functioning long past their breaking point does not necessarily mean that they should. Judaism has long recognized that healthcare decisions should depend upon both prevailing medical practice and the values by which we live our life, especially as our life is nearing its end.

Because critical medical decisions require a moral as well as a medical judgement, and because American law insists that the individual patient has a right to determine his or her medical care, we have a responsibility to our loved ones to make sure our wishes are known and understood at this difficult time. All movements within Jewish tradition support the formation of advance directives or “living wills”. Consult your rabbi for specific guidance within Jewish tradition.

Following Death

Affirmation of Faith / Keriah

When our ancestor Jacob saw his son Joseph’s multicolored coat covered in blood, he immediately rent his clothing as a sign of grief. This custom of tearing one’s garments upon learning of the death of a loved one remains part of Jewish tradition. Sometimes this physical action can express our sadness and loss when words fail us. We proclaim:

בָּרוּךְ הוּא הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה

Baruch Dayan Ha’Emet

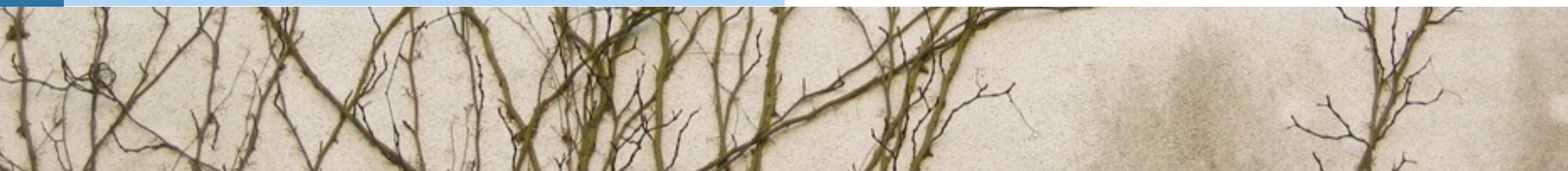
Blessed is the Judge of Truth


Contemporary Reform practice is to tear a black ribbon, often referred to as a *keriah* ribbon, prior to the start of the funeral service instead of tearing one’s clothing.

Immediate Decisions

Consulting the Rabbi

When a loved one passes away, whether suddenly or after extended illness, we often become awash in emotion. Some wish to remain with the body, asking forgiveness for offenses done to the deceased in life. Others spring into action, ready to perform the *mitzvah* of laying a loved one to rest. One of your first calls should be to your rabbi...





...or synagogue, informing them of your loss. Synagogue professionals can help guide you through this sacred yet difficult time. At Temple De Hirsch Sinai, the rabbis can always be reached by leaving a message on the emergency line. To do so, please call (206) 323-8486 and follow the prompts.

The Funeral Home

The funeral home should be consulted soon after the death of a loved one. They are responsible for taking care of the deceased's body and arranging for a local attending doctor to provide the death certificate. Many congregants at Temple work with Butterworth Funeral Home (206-282-5500), particularly if burial is to take place at Hills of Eternity, the Reform Jewish section of Mt. Pleasant Cemetery.

The Cemetery

The burial site is called *beit ha'olam*, an eternal home, and serves as the final address of memory. In communities with a large Jewish presence, such as Seattle, there are frequently separate Jewish cemeteries or dedicated sections within a larger cemetery. If the deceased did not own a plot, a funeral director or the synagogue can assist the family in finding a burial plot. The Temple De Hirsch Sinai cemetery is Hills of Eternity, the Reform Jewish section of Mt. Pleasant Cemetery.


Secondary Decisions

Organ Donation

The religious precept of *p'kuach nefesh*, saving a life, is one of Judaism's highest values. Jews and rabbis from all streams of Judaism support organ donation as a sacred act and one far removed from the desecration of a body. Rabbi Isaac Klein, a Conservative Rabbi, teaches that there can be no greater way to honor the dead than by bringing healing to the living, and Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, an orthodox sage, ruled that organs transplanted to a living body become part of that body, circumventing the Jewish desire to be buried with all organs and limbs intact.

Autopsy

Autopsies have been generally forbidden in Jewish tradition as a needless desecration of the body. In cases of heart failure, cancer, and other previously-diagnosed conditions, it may be surmised that the cause of death is accurately known and an autopsy forbidden. There have, however, always been exceptions to this principle, including when civil authorities require medical examinations or when the autopsy could provide specific medical knowledge capable of helping others.



Funeral Arrangements

There are many necessary considerations when planning a funeral in keeping with Jewish custom and law. The funeral director will schedule an appointment to talk about the service, and you may wish to consult your rabbi with additional questions and considerations you may have. A short list of considerations follows:

Taharah - Ritual physical preparation of the body for burial.

Clothing - Traditional clothing for burial is a plain white shroud, symbolizing our belief in human equality. One may also wish to be wrapped in their *tallit*, prayer shawl.

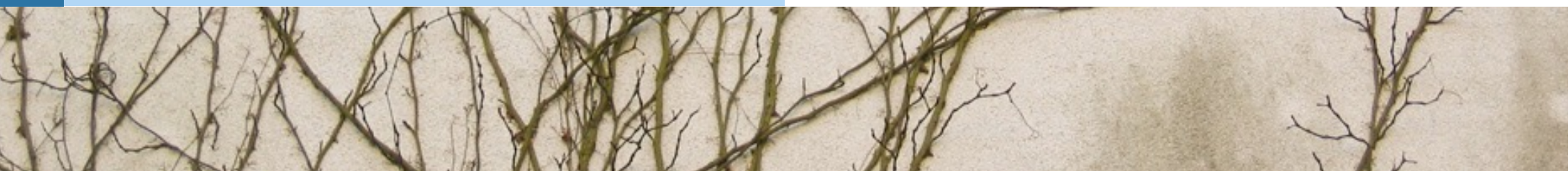
Caskets - From medieval times to the present, Jewish caskets have been crafted from simple, unadorned wood. The goal of a Jewish coffin remains to permit the body to return to the earth as naturally, and as quickly, as possible.

Viewing - Judaism prohibits embalming and strongly discourages viewing the body before burial. In a tradition where memory is considered a sacred obligation, most people prefer to remember the deceased as a vibrant human being.

Burial Plot - Selecting an appropriate burial place for our loved ones is a Jewish obligation dating back to our ancestor Abraham. Given the geographic realities of modern life, with families spread across multiple states and countries, choosing a burial place is more complicated than ever. Judaism has a strong preference for burial beneath the earth, and considerations of *halachah* and emotional resonance lead many away from cremation.

Communal Notification

The Jewish community often feels like a close-knit group of family and friends, and indeed word of a death sometimes travels quickly. While people always have the best of intentions, word of mouth can often lead to conflicting information about funeral or *minyan* times. Thoughtful practice involves informing family, friends, and your community about the arrangements you have made. You will be asked by the synagogue if you would like to allow fellow congregants to learn of your loss and the arrangements you have made for mourning, and the funeral director can help guide decisions about obituaries and memorials for local news organizations.





Funeral/Interment

Service

Burial takes place as soon as possible following death, though never on Shabbat or on holidays. There is a preference in Jewish tradition for morning services as we hasten to perform this greatest of *mitzvot*, honoring our loved one. The service may take place in a funeral home, the synagogue, or be conducted graveside. Prior to the service, immediate family often gathers with the rabbi to perform the act of *keriah*, the symbolic tearing of a ribbon to symbolize the tear of a loved one from our hearts. The service itself is often stark in simplicity, sharing texts from Jewish tradition and words about the deceased. Psalms are read and a eulogy is delivered. Often the prayer *Eil Maleh Rachamim*, God Full of Compassion, will be recited before proceeding, if necessary, to the burial site.

Eulogy

The eulogy, or *hesped* in Hebrew, is an opportunity to praise the deceased for the good that they did in this world. Great eulogies are made of real stories, evoking real emotions, recalling a life that changed the world forever. Prior to the service, the rabbi will ask to meet with the family, getting to know the deceased through the eyes of those who loved him/her. Mourners should never feel pressure to speak...

...at a funeral. If mourners do decide to speak, it is important to set limits, determining who should speak on behalf of the family and for how long.

Burial

If the service took place in the funeral home or the synagogue, mourners will walk or drive with the casket to the burial site. If the service is being conducted graveside, the rabbi will signal a transition to the burial service. Beginning with some readings from Jewish tradition, often the Book of Psalms, the casket will be lowered into the earth before the recitation of the Mourner's Kaddish. The most striking and often emotional part of the Jewish funeral then occurs, as mourners participate in the physical act of burial. Using the back of the shovel first, demonstrating our reluctance to perform even this most sacred obligation, mourners proceed to shovel earth onto the casket. The hollow sound of this action provides closure as we are able to take care of those who took care of us in life.

Children at Funerals

The needs of each child and each family are different and you should consult your rabbi prior to the service. Often children are more capable of understanding death than we think and can benefit from the closure of a funeral service.



Tzedakah

Tzedakah, or righteous giving, is an important Jewish funeral custom. Funeral attendees and mourners should consider making a donation to a charity or organization important to the deceased in lieu of sending flowers.

Mourning Observances

Who is a Mourner?

Jewish law formally considers the bereaved to be those who have lost any one of the seven close relatives mentioned in the Book of Leviticus (21:1-3): father, mother, wife/husband, son, daughter, sister, and brother. Minors, adopted family, and other relatives and friends do not share the same obligations are mourners, though they may choose to join for some or all observances from their own grief or out of sympathy and solidarity.

Shiva

Jewish law and custom recognizes different stages of grief following the loss of a loved one. *Shiva*, the first seven days of intensive mourning, is often marked by mourners taking the time to grieve - sitting low to the ground...

...covering mirrors to avoid self-centered thoughts, and surrounding themselves with family and friends. While *shiva* is often thought of as a list of prohibitions, there are many ways we might sit with... our grief: remembering, reminiscing, readings, writing, praying, walking, and resting.

Meal of Consolation

The meal of consolation is the first meal eaten by mourners following the burial service. Symbolic foods, including eggs and bread, are served. Often brought by family and friends, this meal helps to ensure that the physical needs of the mourners are being met by those who care.

Minyan Services

Jewish law has it that mourners are to recite the Mourner's Kaddish daily in memory of their recently departed. Since Kaddish is best recited with a *minyan*, a quorum of ten, and since mourners were traditionally prohibited from leaving their homes, the synagogue came to them. Often times a rabbi from the synagogue will be invited to lead a brief service, evening or morning, including the memorial prayers *El Maleh Rachamim* and the Mourner's Kaddish. It is quite common for those who wish to share a favorite memory or reflection honoring the deceased.

Saying Kaddish

The Mourner's Kaddish calls out to God from the depths of human tragedy. Jews recite this exaltation at the very moment when faith itself is shaken - upon the irreparable loss of one closest to the heart. We maintain the connection between the bereaved and the Holy One even while wrestling and struggling, and in doing so we link ourselves firmly to Jewish tradition.

Jewish custom is to recite the Mourner's Kaddish for a lost loved one daily during the periods of intensive mourning, *Shiva* (7 days) and *Sheloshim* (30 days). When grieving the loss of a parent, including step-parents and adopted parents, custom is to recite Kaddish for 11 months. There is comfort in the repetition of this ritual, yet sometimes we yearn for something new: a new way of expressing and understanding our grief.

Recited in Aramaic, a cognate language of Hebrew, the Mourner's Kaddish is more than the sum of its words. History, legend, and practice combine to create this important Jewish custom.

Yitgadal v'yitkdash sh'mei raba.

B'alma di v'ra chirutei,

v'yamlich malchutei, b'chayeichon

uv'yomeichon uv'chayei d'chol

beit Yisrael, ba'agala

u'vizman kariv. V'imru: Amen.

Y'hei sh'mei raba m'varach

l'alam ul'al'mei almay.

Yitbarach v'yishtabach v'yitpa'ar

v'yitromam v'yitnasei v'yit'hadar

v'yitaleh v'yit'halal sh'mei

d'kud'sha B'rich Hu,

l'eila min kol birchata

v'shir'ata, tush'b'chata

v'nechemata, da'amiran

b'alma. V'imru: Amen.

Y'hei sh'lama raba min

sh'maya, v'chayim aleinu v'al

kol Yisrael. V'imru: Amen.

Oseh shalom bimromav, Hu

ya'aseh shalom aleinu, v'al

kol Yisrael. V'imru: Amen.

יִתְגַּדַּל וְיִתְקַדַּשׁ שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא.

בְּעֶלְמָא דִּי בְּרָא כְּרֻעֻתָּהּ.

וְיַמְלִיךְ מַלְכוּתָּהּ, בְּחַיֵּינוּ

וּבְיוֹמֵינוּ וּבְחַיֵּי דְכָל

בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּעֶגְלָא

וּבְזִמְנֵי קָרִיב. וְאָמְרוּ: אָמֵן.

יְהֵא שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא מְבָרַךְ

לְעָלַם וּלְעֵלְמֵי עֲלַמְיָא.

יִתְבָּרַךְ וְיִשְׁתַּבַּח, וְיִתְפָּאֵר

וְיִתְרֻמֵּם וְיִתְנַשֵּׂא, וְיִתְהַדַּר

וְיִתְעַלֶּה וְיִתְהַלָּל שְׁמֵהּ

דְּקֻדְשָׁא בְּרִיךְ הוּא,

לְעֵלְא מִן כָּל בִּרְכָתָא

וְשִׁירָתָא, תִּשְׁבְּחָתָא

וְנַחֲמָתָא, דְּאָמִירָן

בְּעֶלְמָא. וְאָמְרוּ: אָמֵן.

יְהֵא שְׁלָמָא רַבָּא מִן

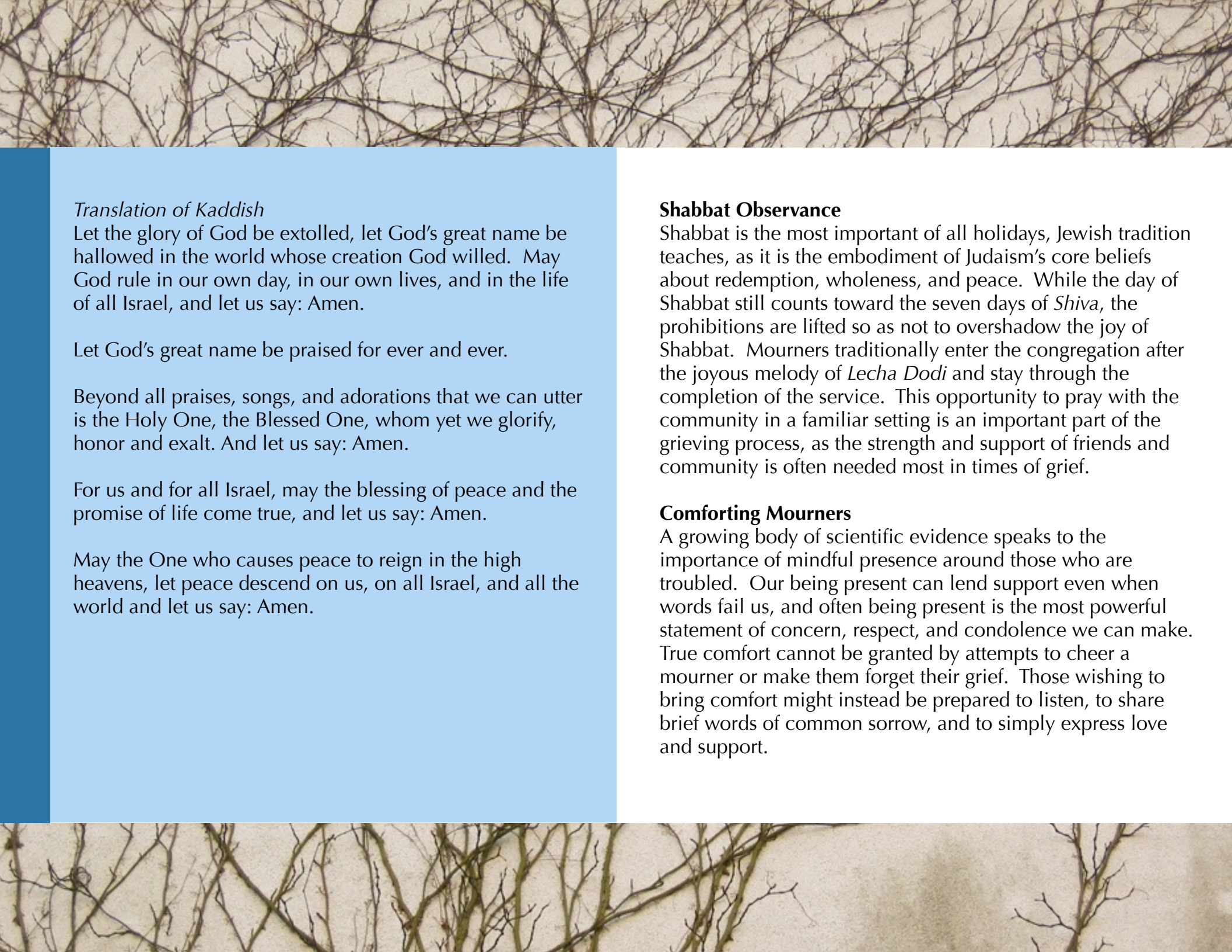
שְׁמַיָּא, וַחַיִּים עֲלֵינוּ, וְעַל

כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל. וְאָמְרוּ: אָמֵן.

עֹשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמִרְמֵי הוּא

יַעֲשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם עֲלֵינוּ וְעַל

כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל. וְאָמְרוּ: אָמֵן.



Translation of Kaddish

Let the glory of God be extolled, let God's great name be hallowed in the world whose creation God willed. May God rule in our own day, in our own lives, and in the life of all Israel, and let us say: Amen.

Let God's great name be praised for ever and ever.

Beyond all praises, songs, and adorations that we can utter is the Holy One, the Blessed One, whom yet we glorify, honor and exalt. And let us say: Amen.

For us and for all Israel, may the blessing of peace and the promise of life come true, and let us say: Amen.

May the One who causes peace to reign in the high heavens, let peace descend on us, on all Israel, and all the world and let us say: Amen.

Shabbat Observance

Shabbat is the most important of all holidays, Jewish tradition teaches, as it is the embodiment of Judaism's core beliefs about redemption, wholeness, and peace. While the day of Shabbat still counts toward the seven days of *Shiva*, the prohibitions are lifted so as not to overshadow the joy of Shabbat. Mourners traditionally enter the congregation after the joyous melody of *Lecha Dodi* and stay through the completion of the service. This opportunity to pray with the community in a familiar setting is an important part of the grieving process, as the strength and support of friends and community is often needed most in times of grief.

Comforting Mourners

A growing body of scientific evidence speaks to the importance of mindful presence around those who are troubled. Our being present can lend support even when words fail us, and often being present is the most powerful statement of concern, respect, and condolence we can make. True comfort cannot be granted by attempts to cheer a mourner or make them forget their grief. Those wishing to bring comfort might instead be prepared to listen, to share brief words of common sorrow, and to simply express love and support.



Sheloshim

Jewish law obligates official mourners to continue their period of mourning beyond the seven days of *Shiva*. During *Sheloshim*, the thirty days following a death, mourners return to work and to their worldly obligations, while still maintaining the space they need to grief. Distractions and everyday pleasures might be limited in so far as they take away from grief, at least until a mourner is ready for them to return. Observance of this period of time may be shortened by a major holiday, though mourners should consult their rabbi about the best way to recognize and honor their grief in these situations.

Yahrzeit

Jews call the anniversary of a death a *yahrzeit*, Yiddish for “a year’s time.” It is customary to remember the passing of a loved one each year after their death on either the Hebrew or the secular calendar. Mourners stand for the Mourner’s Kaddish during Shabbat services, that the community can recognize them as their grief ages and changes, and many choose to light a twenty-four hour candle in their home to mark this anniversary.

R e m e m b r a n c e s

Yizkor

During Yom Kippur afternoon services and on each of the pilgrimage festivals - Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot - a special series of prayers are recited in the synagogue to honor those who have departed this earth. From the root meaning “to remember,” reciting these prayers is an important part of a mourner’s emotional journey. Saying *Yizkor* during these holidays, which themselves invoke many memories, keeps the memory of our loved ones front-and-center even as we continue living our lives.

Unveiling Service

Jewish tradition permits the dedication of a headstone or grave marker any time after the end of *Sheloshim*, the thirty day period of mourning. It has become customary to wait until approximately a year after the death to hold the “unveiling” ceremony, so named because a white cotton or linen cover is removed from the marker at that time. The ceremony, which is often brief and without a formal eulogy, may take place on any day except Shabbat or a Jewish holiday.