

FROM THE TIME OF DEATH TO THE FUNERAL

Jewish custom recommends that burial take place as soon as possible. This is done as a sign of respect for the deceased. It also provides a great psychological benefit to the family. In today's world, however, brief delays are often necessary to allow family members to gather. The Sabbath and Jewish holidays may also necessitate delays. The clergy will advise you on the burial.

- ***Shmirah*** (watching the body): It is traditional Jewish practice to not leave the deceased alone (unguarded) from the moment of death until burial. Some Beth El congregants follow this practice. It includes the recitation of Psalms while guarding the body. *Shomrim* (guardians) may be relatives or personal friends of the deceased. *Shomrim* can be provided by the Area-Wide Chevra Kadisha. To arrange for *shomrim*, consult with the clergy on this matter.
- **Autopsy**: Autopsy is discouraged, for the sake of honoring the deceased, and should be performed only if required by the authorities.
- **Organ Donation**: Jewish law, permits organ donation under various conditions. The clergy should be consulted for the specifics of organ donation. For more information on organ donation, please [click here](#).
- **Embalming**: Embalming is contrary to Jewish practice and permitted only under unusual circumstances or where required by authorities. The latter is sometimes the case when death takes place out of the country.
- **Tahara (ritual cleansing)**: Participation in *tahara* is a mitzvah of the highest order and is performed by members of the Chevra Kadisha ("Burial Society") who are knowledgeable about traditional customs. Cleansing of the body and ritual washing are accompanied by the recitation of prayers. Women perform *taharot* on women, men perform *taharot* on men. Close relatives of the deceased do not perform *tahara*. Only members of the Chevra Kadisha are permitted to be in the room during *tahara*.
- **Tachrichim (burial garments)**: We are all considered equal before God, whether we were rich or poor in life. Therefore, the tradition requires that all Jews be buried in the same type of garment. Burial clothes are simple, handmade white garments, signifying purity, simplicity, and dignity. A Jewish male is customarily buried wearing a *kippah* and a *tallit*. A Jewish woman may also be buried wearing her *tallit* if desired.
- **Aron (casket)**: This should be made entirely of wood without decoration or lining. A "plain pine box" is the traditional coffin. Of course, there are several levels of "plain pine box." Mourners are encouraged to aim for simplicity and modesty. Earth from Israel is provided by the Chevra Kadisha and placed within the coffin.
- **Flowers**: These are not part of a Jewish burial. Sometimes they are sent by employers or others who are not aware of our tradition. They can be displayed in the *Shivah* house or given to a nursing home but will not be used at the funeral service. If someone asks about flowers, you may want to indicate that a contribution to a charitable cause in memory of the deceased is an appropriate and preferred way of expressing sympathy and respect. You may also wish to have available at the shivah some information about charities that were important to the deceased.
- **Cremation**: Jewish law does not permit cremation. If the deceased has insisted on cremation, the clergy will discuss with you the kinds of services that are still possible.