

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.

Shmira (the watching of the remains): It is traditional Jewish practice to not leave the deceased alone (unguarded) from the moment of death until burial. It includes the recitation of Psalms while guarding the body. Shomrim (guardians) sit with the body at the funeral home until the time of burial. They may be relatives or personal friends of the deceased, or persons provided by the funeral home.

Autopsy: Autopsy is discouraged by Jewish tradition 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. You may consult the clergy for the specifics of organ donation. For more information, [click here](#).

Embalming: Embalming is contrary to Jewish practice and permitted only under unusual circumstances or where required by authorities.

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. Careful and caring cleansing and ritual preparation of the body for burial in accordance with Jewish custom and law is accompanied by the recitation of prayers. Women perform *taharot* on women, and men 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*. The work of the Chevra Kadisha constitutes a *Chesed Shel Emet*, a true act of kindness that is performed without ulterior motive, for the service can never be repaid. Beth El does not have its own Chevra Kadisha and uses the services of the Chevra Kadisha of Greater Washington.

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 a *tallit*.

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 a "plain pine box". Mourners are encouraged to aim for simplicity and modesty. Earth from Israel may be provided by the Chevra Kadisha and placed within the casket.

Flowers: These are not part of a Jewish funeral or burial. Sometimes they are sent by those not aware of our tradition. When this occurs, they can be displayed in the Shiva house, donated to a local nursing home, or given to someone who will appreciate them. A contribution to a charitable cause in memory of the deceased is an appropriate and preferred way of expressing sympathy and respect.

Cremation: Jewish law does not permit cremation. If the deceased has chosen cremation, the clergy will discuss with you the kinds of service that are possible.